



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



The decorative border is highly ornate. On the left, a cherub-like figure holds a fan and a mirror. Above the title, a bear is depicted in a landscape. To the right of the title, there is a bottle and a glass. The entire border is composed of intricate scrollwork and floral patterns.

Incomparable Bellairs

by
Agnes
& Egerton Castle

21427.32.5



**HARVARD
COLLEGE
LIBRARY**

Incomparable Bellairs

By Agnes & Egerton Castle

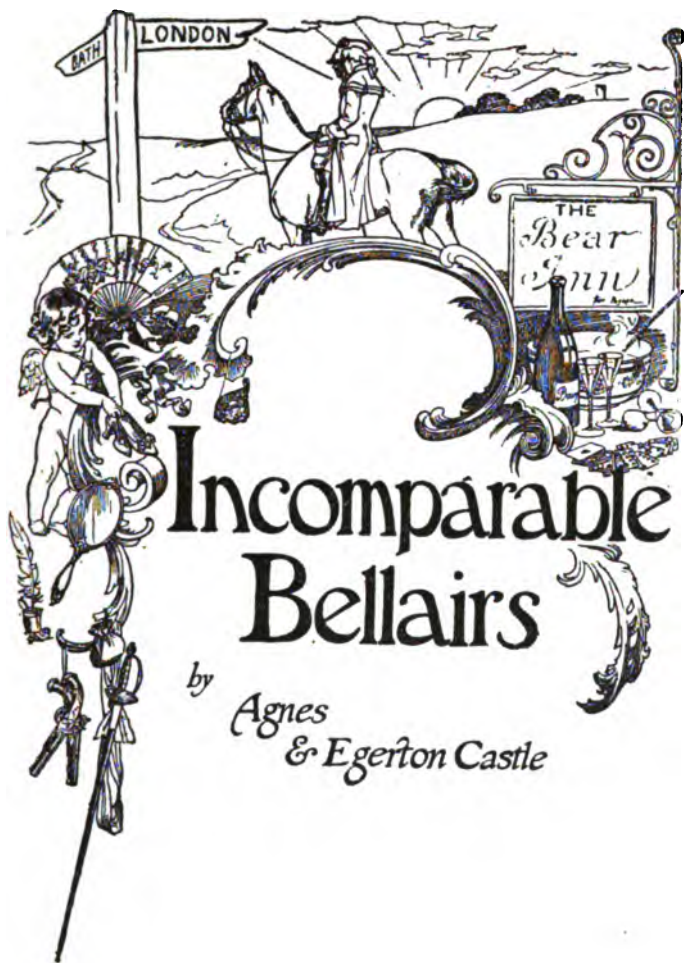
THE STAR DREAMER
THE PRIDE OF JENNICO
THE SECRET ORCHARD
THE BATH COMEDY
THE HOUSE OF ROMANCE



By Egerton Castle

Y O U N G A P R I L
THE LIGHT OF SCARTHEY
C O N S E Q U E N C E S
MARSHFIELD *the* OBSERVER

SCHOOLS AND MASTERS OF
FENCE . ENGLISH BOOK-
PLATES . THE JERNING-
HAM LETTERS . LE ROMAN
DU PRINCE OTHON



New York
Frederick A. Stokes Company
Publishers

21427.32.5
✓



Copyright, 1903, by P. F. Collier & Son

Copyright, 1903, by Egerton Castle

Copyright, 1903, by Frederick A. Stokes Company

All rights reserved

This edition published in November, 1903

To

Austin Dobson

*Who, by his delicate art, has made all that is shapely and
charming in the Eighteenth Century live again for us,
as with a fragrance of old Pot-Pourri and a
rustle of brocades no loom holds now the
secret of; as, with a lost grace, to the
dance of little high heels stilled
long ago and the measures
of a forgotten
music*

TO THE READER

*ASSUME that we are friends. Assume
A common taste for old costume,—
Old pictures,— books. Then dream us sitting —
Us two—in some soft lighted room.*

.
.

*Silent at first, in time we glow ;
Discuss "eclectics," high and low ;
Inspect engravings, 'twixt us passing
The fancies of DETROY, MOREAU.*

.
.

*And so we fall to why and how
The fragile figures smile and bow ;
Divine, at length, the fable under . . .
Thus grew the "scenes" that follow now.*

(From PROVERBS IN PORCELAIN.

AUSTIN DOBSON.)



CONTENTS

TITLE-PAGE *by Fred Pegram*

	PAGE
TO THE READER	viii

FRONTISPIECE

<i>The acknowledged Queen of Bath</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>By Fred Pegram</i>	

INTRODUCTORY

<i>Concerning Kitty</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>The Prologue</i>	<i>xxii</i>

THE SCENES

<i>I The Bridegroom Reject</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>II Grey Domino</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>III To the Tune of Little Red Heels</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>IV Rachel Peace</i>	<i>147</i>
<i>V The Little Lover</i>	<i>195</i>
<i>VI The Black Lace Mask</i>	<i>239</i>



The acknowledged Queen of Bath



“**A**DVENTURES,” it has been said,
“come to the adventurous” — ‘Tis a
glib enough saw, but you may see the
truth of it any day, if you care to watch in
the Theatre of Life. And adventures come
not only to the darer of perils by flood and
field, to the player with fire and wielder of
the sword’s argument, but also to the bold
taker of shares in the perpetual lottery of
Love. In the pretty game of “Love and
Hazard,” as well as in the sterner one of
War, ’tis your fine decisive spirit which rules
circumstance and leads the gambler unscathed
amid pitfalls where the timid, or even the
merely prudent, are like to leave life or limb.

Love — the chief adventure of life, some
maintain — comes to the lovely, to the lovable,
as sure as mountain stream to lake; and to
such as are in love with love, love adventures

“come not single spies but in battalions.”

[xiii]

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Nevertheless, let the heart be pure, let even the taste be but fastidious, then will these same adventures link you a chaplet of jewelled memories — to be retold smiling, in the more sedate hours of life.

Mistress Kitty Bellairs, "Incomparable Bellairs," as, in an enthusiastic moment she had been proclaimed by Mr. Stafford — that fine connoisseur if ever there lived one! — had, among her unnumbered lovable qualities, paramount, a most fastidious daintiness. Hence, no doubt, the delicate colour and the fragrance of that chaplet of tender triumphs, of sweet crises and emotions, of unexhausted romances which, already in this, the rosy lustre of her young twenties, she could draw through the fingers of memory.

"My dear," (she is recorded to have said to her weeping friend, Lady Standish) "I have had thirty-seven declared adorers these three years, and never one tired of me yet! — Poor Bellairs!" (as she pursued on that occasion, with a light sigh), "he had two wives before me and he was sixty-nine when

❧ CONCERNING KITTY ❧

he died, but he told me with his dying breath that 't was I gave him all the joy he ever knew."

The boast would have been a pretty one on any fair woman's lips, but 't was the prettier on Kitty's that it was true to the letter.

Wedded, in her innocent teens, to a wondrous wealthy Nabob—an excellent gentleman withal, who had requested the little Beauty, in a phrase that held humour as well as pathos, "to condescend to be his widow"—Kitty had been released after not too many years of faithful companionship and solicitous care spent at the waters of Bath and elsewhere. Released with two easy tears and a clear conscience; experienced but not embittered, and by no means inconsolable; released, in short, to all the delights of a charming world.

So much for "Poor Bellairs!"

"These three years" referred to the period of brilliant young widowhood during which Kitty had become the acknowledged Queen of Bath—during which, also, innumerable had been the attempts to provide her with a happy consort.

But if Kitty the girl had submitted to a marriage de convenance, Kitty the woman, in

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

the ripeness of her beauty, had no mind to deal with Love otherwise than as her slave. Thus, at the particular date at which we take up these episodes, she had already collected a variety of experiences of the heart, which, although inconclusive, had not been devoid of sweetness to her, nor of pride.

It would be unseemly perhaps, at such a stage of her life, to draw a parallel between Mistress Bellairs and the celebrated Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, who was awarded the final crown of feminine glory in a passionate déclaration d'amour and an offer of marriage on her seventieth birthday. But, whatever the Fates might have in reserve for the future Kitty, she had already this much in common with the much beloved Ninon, that she never lost the devotion of one of her many rejected lovers. Some may have ascended only a step or two of her throne; some others (as in the case of my Lord Verney and that of Mr. O'Hara, whose love-chase formed the main theme of the Bath Comedy), may have all but stepped into the throne itself. But every one, on returning to level ground, sedulously resumed his post of courtier and still had it in

❧ CONCERNING KITTY ❧

his soul to sing to Kitty, in Herrick's words to his Anthea :

*Bid me to live and I will live
Thy protestant to be. . . .*

*Bid that heart stay, and it will stay
To honour thy decree.*

The disposal of so precious a thing as Mistress Bellairs' hand—a prize certainly held as high in her own estimation as in that of her "protestants"—was naturally a matter of much concern, of serious consideration.

It was not of Kitty that could be said :

" The woman who deliberates is lost."

Her deliberation was exquisite. It was subtilised by ambitions of happiness, of satisfaction beyond the usual measure of womanhood. On the other hand, she had a secret unreadiness to think the world well lost for love. In truth, along the easy road of a quite satisfactory life, turning points should be approached with caution : the new path may, of course, lead to an enchanting prospect ; but again . . . In short the question of a second marriage was fraught with anxieties.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Meanwhile 't was clean against Nature that such treasures (and, upon such a theme, it would little fit us to mention mere wealth of gold otherwise than as a further pleasing circumstance) that such treasures of loveliness should remain long without a legitimate master. Therefore, after she had shaken off her entanglement with the far too solemn Lord Verney, and further, had trampled with adorable little feet upon the far too mercurial Mr. O'Hara's inextinguishable devotion — all in the diplomatic manner set forth in the Bath Comedy — the unsolved problem had become a main topic and one of prodigious interest in the gayer world at the Springs.

.

The latest candidate is now Mr. Stafford. He has his recommendations — 't is a favourite with man and woman, an admitted wit; a spark with a fine head and a good leg; a rake with a mighty delicate conception that life is to be tasted and not greedily devoured — the Laughing Philosopher of Beaux. And it is at the point of Kitty's formal engagement to this silvery gentleman that we propose to take up with her fresh journey towards matrimony.

❧ CONCERNING KITTY ❧

In this Sentimental Progress — which is all of the Bath Road — we shall meet with many of the actors of yesteryear's Bath Comedy. Among them, Mr. O'Hara, impecunious as ever and as ever buoyed up with disinterested devotion. Miss Lydia, the widow's own woman, still addicted to secret interference in her mistress's affairs. Master Lawrence (whose little boy drew such amazing clever portraits), genial host of the Bear Inn. My Lord Verney only looms in the background: a memory and a warning; but his lordship, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, has a weighty part towards the journey's end. Crook-eyed Captain Spicer also, the led-captain and fashionable bear-leader, darts in and out, among the company: not to his own advancement, it must be owned, but (in a way as indirect as his vision) to the promotion of the more important travellers' happiness. And, as in all journeys, new personalities appear at the various stages — a lovely one among them, Rachel Peace; another, less easily described, Lord Mandeville; and the youthful ingenuous figure of one Mr. Jernigan of Costessy.

Shape our course for a chosen harbour as carefully as we list, we are always at the

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

mercy of the accident of other lives than ours. Kitty, the imperious and much-obeyed, confidently believed, of course, that she held the guiding thread of her own voyage in her own pretty hands. But we, behind the scenes, looking around her life, find many causes (quite undreamed of by her pretty head) which brought, say, her to this halt and to yonder turning, and at last to that final haven which, certes, had been well out of her original reckoning; we find, in short, the birth of all these winds of Fate—and 't is in a singularly unexpected quarter.

On a certain torrential night of September, my Lord Mandeville, a nobleman of wide repute in Town, sought refuge, and the relaxation of an idle hour, in the green-room of "the Little Theatre" (then leased by the celebrated Mr. Foote to some travelling company). Now, nothing could be more purely personal than what happened that evening to his lordship, who at the time, moreover, was as totally unknown to Mistress Bellairs as she to him. And yet it remains certain that none of the events which had such a marked influence upon her matrimonial destiny would have come to pass, if (while unconscious Mistress

[xx]

❧ CONCERNING KITTY ❧

Kitty was discussing wedding fal-lals with her tire-woman in Queen Square, Bath), my Lord Mandeville had not had, as we said, an empty evening to fill, in the neighbourhood of the Haymarket, London.

"Incomparable Bellairs," being our leading lady in the company, the chief rôle must ever fall to her; yet in this opening episode, the consequences of which will later on so greatly concern her, she actually appears neither in person nor in spirit. For this reason we will relate it apart and, under the name, if you will, of The Heart of Mandeville, call it:

THE PROLOGUE.





“**L**A! your lordship,” cried Miss Peggy Pommeroy, turning her celebrated blue eyes roguishly upon Lord Mandeville.

They sat together upon the striped sofa in the green-room; she, for his entertainment, passing comments on each actor and actress who lingered in the vicinity of the mirror, awaiting the call, or hurried through to the curtain. His lordship listened, all insolent languor. At rare intervals a little snort would escape him — his nearest approach to laughter. And, if he were moved to such expressions of amusement, it was not so much with Miss Pommeroy, as at her. Yet it was all glory for Peggy to have him beside her, the most notorious *roué* upon the Town, and the most fastidious. There were ladies, and great ladies too, as she was aware, who

[xxii]

❧ THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE ❧

would lightly have given all their admirers for Lord Mandeville's indolent notice. What mattered it that she well knew, in her heart, how empty was this conquest; well knew that not a smile or a frown in her whole repertory had really the power to charm him; that he but lolled at her side because, having drifted into the green-room, this weeping autumn night, he was simply too lazy to move again and pulled her curls with no more emotion than he played with the seals at his fob? The others knew naught of all this; and it was enough for Peg. Oh, how her great eyes shone and ogled; how arch was she and how coy! How her ripe lips smiled and how loud (as each new comer entered the room) they rebuked some unexistent ardour!

Of all passions, vanity is perhaps that which, gratified, affords the most complete and lasting satisfaction. Peg's bosom swelled with triumph as she noted the impression produced upon her colleagues—how the Noble Father frowned and strutted with fresh zest as he passed; how her dear rival, feigning to examine the position of a patch, sought to catch his lordship's eye in the mirror, and failed.

[xxiii]

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"La! your lordship," cried Peggy, very loud and shrill, "I vow I must not listen when you say such things!"

Lord Mandeville opened his heavy lids a little wider for an instant, and almost hesitated on speech. It would have been hard indeed for Miss Pommeroy to have listened, for he had not uttered anything more audible than a grunt these five minutes. But Miss de Vyne (the dear rival) could not be aware of this; and the glance of furious envy that she darted at her friend as she flounced out of the room filled the young lady with ecstasy. She had moreover succeeded beyond her intention. For, just before Miss de Vyne's exit, Mr. Montagu Mortemar had made his entrance: and, for the first time in his life, he seemed to become really aware of Peggy Pommeroy's existence.

Now, of all men on earth, the First Comedy Lady most admired the Tragic Leading Gentleman. Before the native grandeur of his pale brow all the coronets in the world were lustreless in her sight: but to show him with what high-placed friends she could on occasions consort — that was truly a moment worth living for!

[xxiv]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

Mr. Mortemar's part was done for the night: he had just been conclusively stabbed, had gulped forth his last blessing and his last curse, and his corpse had duly been carried away by lamenting retainers. He was stalking down the length of the room, at his best tragedy manner, when the arch cry struck his ear. He started, turned; elevated one eyebrow to anguish, depressed the other to menace. His hand was on his hip. — If anyone could have thought him more noble than he thought himself, it was Peggy Pommeroy. — Perceiving, however, the identity of Miss Pommeroy's admirer, a change came over him. With a sleeking of his whole attitude, he bowed profoundly and approached.

"We are honoured to see your lordship among us! I trust, my lord, you will permit me to recall myself to your lordship's recollection: — I had the honour of meeting your lordship at the *Three Tuns*."

"Had you," said his lordship. He tilted his head further back on the sofa cushions to gaze at Mr. Mortemar; and wished vaguely that "the mummer would stop smiling."

The tragedian's fingers trembled round
[xxv]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

his snuff-box. His lordship's affability was great: did it justify the happy recipient in offering a pinch?

"Your lordship has seen my 'Altamont' to-night? Connoisseurs are kind enough to tell me that they prefer it to Davy's. But poor little Davy—" he paused. Lord Mandeville was yawning outrageously.

"Oh—Davy . . ." echoed Miss Pommeroy with great contempt, running a fervid glance over Altamont's fine proportions.

The room had begun to fill about them: the Tragedy was over, the Farce would begin anon. The First Villain—in private life an irrepressibly jovial soul—clapped his late victim brutally on the back, crying:

"What cheer, my buck! Curse me if ever we did the business finer than to-night!"

A wan smile curled Mr. Mortemar's lips: "We . . .!"

Mrs. Macnamara, — this evening "*Zenobia, wife of the Mountain Chief*," in brocade and powder, progressed towards the centre of the room, surrounded by "*Mountain Maidens*" in tiffany and straw hats. She was thinking ardently of supper, but, at sight of Peggy and her lounging Lord, halted with marked disapproval.

[xxvi]

❧ THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE ❧

And still the company grew larger, between the two plays. Many accepted patrons strolled in from the side-boxes — Mr. Stafford, fine, bright and clean-cutting as his own ready sword, doomed (as was already known behind the scenes) to approaching matrimony, but taking the life of London Town with renewed gallantry for his last fling. After him, Captain Spicer, that noted guide of youth. No one could tolerate the creature, yet he knew everyone, he went everywhere. The name of his whilom regiment was a mystery; but there was little mystery about his present occupation. He had a military eye for a country recruit — a celebrated gift for drilling the bumpkin in the manœuvres of the world; and if, at the end of a campaign, the gallant instructor's pockets were heavy and his recruit's correspondingly light, why it showed that the latter's education was complete.

To-night, Captain Spicer's oblique vision shone with unusual triumph and there was a glow on his bloodless cheek: he had in tow a stout young gentleman from the city of Norwich, whose late father had been reputed as of fabulous wealth. They had each

[xxvii]

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

under their belts perhaps more Burgundy than could be carried with grace.

"Ah, my lord," cried Stafford, "the evening to you!" His eye was roving round the room as he spoke. — "I vow, Miss Pommeroy, your blue eyes are more prodigious large than ever!"

"They need be," retorted the girl with her impudent ogle, "to take in so many fine bucks together." Her rolling orbs lingered on Mortemar — But he was adamant. Then she shot a sidelong leer towards his lordship, to see if he were any way stirred. But still his lordship sat yawning, the image of weariness.

"Will Mr. Stafford have a pinch?" quoth Mortemar, with his best leg and his superlative flourish. He was desperately proud of his snuff-box (which, he was fond of hinting, was a tender memento from an enamoured lady of quality). With the tail of his eye on Mandeville, he began to work up to the anecdote: "Do I see you notice this little trinket? . . . A curious history, sir—"

"Gad, Mr. Mortemar is that you? No snuff, I thank you, sir — 'T is a fad of mine, but, to my thinking, there's but one fashion of enjoying rapee."

[xxviii]

❧ THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE ❧

"And what is that?" eagerly asked the young gentleman from Norwich. Stafford wheeled, and measured the recruit with a haughty eye.

"From a little white wrist, my good fellow," he answered at length. "He who has thus tasted his pinch ——" he broke off.

"Put a pinch on my wrist," Miss Pomeroy was crying with a giggle; and, her eyes on Stafford, thrust forth that plump member.

"Do, Mr. Mortemar," said Stafford, "and Captain Spicer's new friend, can practise. But recommend him to shut his mouth."

Then he turned airily to Mrs. Macnamara.

"My dear madam," said he, "I vow I have been thrilled! Zenobia . . . Zenobia is a magnificent performance. Zenobia, with her bevy of maidens —" He swept a smiling glance along the self-conscious row: black eyes, grey eyes, sly eyes, innocent eyes gave him back his handsome look with interest. And yet his gaze wandered like that of one seeking. "'T was a sight to make an old man young, and —"

"And a young gentleman?" put in Mrs. Macnamara with a jolly fat laugh — On the boards she outdid Mrs. Siddons; but behind

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

the scenes she was plain Bridget Macnamara, with a good-natured heart, an easy morality and a zest for meals.

"A young gentleman, if you mean me, ma'am," said Tom Stafford, "wished he had twenty hearts . . . and as many purses."

"Oh, fie, sir, who talks of purses!"

"Merely as a means of expressing the feeling of a true heart, Ma'am," said Stafford, with his most engaging smile. "But, by-the-way, do I not miss one of the bewitching mountain maidens?"

"Oh, Mr. Stafford, sir—" she menaced with her massive finger.

"The creature with the voice, Mrs. Macnamara."

"The creature with the voice—? Why—he means my new pupil, girls!" said Mrs. Macnamara delighted. The days were long gone by when the light in a young man's eye could hold any personal meaning for her: but she had not lost her sympathy with love.

A shrug and a look of scorn now passed among the listening damsels, as you may see the wind ruffle the cornfields: this butterfly gentleman in silver brocade had but a poor taste after all! But Mrs. Macnamara had

[xxx]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

caught Miss de Vyne by the arm, and whispered in her ear:

"The child has never had one bit of fun since she came to us. Go tell her that I want her. Mind, my dear, *I* want her. Bid her here instantly." She nodded and smiled, as the messenger whisked away.

"You'd never believe it, sir, that girl — (oh you've got an eye, Mr. Stafford, you've noticed her!) — now mark my words, that girl will be the greatest actress on the stage one of these fine days, or my name is not Bridget Macnamara."

"Why, the thing's a Quaker!" cried the pertest of maidens, interrupting her conversation with the young gentleman from Norwich to throw the denunciation over her shoulder.

"A Quaker!" echoed Stafford, more interested than ever.

"Who's a Quaker?" hiccoughed the young gentleman from Norwich. "Quakers . . . ecod, we grow 'em fine, at Norwich!"

"Do Quakers ever kiss?" inquired Lord Mandeville, raising his lazy voice.

"Yes — on the sly," said Peggy, tartly.

"Neither in public, nor on the sly, Miss Pommeroy," put in the matron, with some

[xxxi]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

severity — (Peggy was not of her favourites) — “has my pupil ever known any such familiarities — poor child!” concluded the lady, half to herself, with a sudden relapse from dignity.

“Pasitively quite a phenamenan!” lisped Captain Spicer.

“I declare,” cried a gentleman in plum-colour — “a shocking state of affairs! — Where is the young lady, that this omission may instantly be rectified?” And he laughed in delight at his own wit.

“It would take a better man than you, Sir Thomas, I’m thinking,” said Mrs. Macnamara with her fat laugh.

“By gum, is it a wager?” cried Captain Spicer’s recruit. This youth was beginning to have vague glimmers of a fast gentleman’s duties in London Town. “Ecod, if it’s for kissing a Quaker, I’m on for it . . . We know how to deal with ’em, at Norwich!” He winked offensively; then, of a sudden, kissed the nearest maiden with a smack, and was instantly paid back by a swinging box on the ear.

“Mr. Staffard, sir,” cried Captain Spicer, “are you for a wager?” (When was Tom Staffard not for a wager, even with so un-

[xxxii]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

congenial a taker as Captain Spicer? He would almost as soon have refused a duel!) "And you, my Lord?"

"If any one is wagering, I'll wager," said his lordship. "Perhaps someone will kindly tell me what it is about."

"Tis who shall kiss the Quaker," said Captain Spicer, waggishly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" clucked Mrs. Macnamara in some fluster.

"Nay," said Mr. Stafford, "the bet, as I take it, is won by him whom the lady herself shall choose for favour."

"Why, certainly," said Spicer, with one severe orb on his pupil. "I trust we're all gentlemen here. Shall each stake ten guineas?"

"I'll have no tricks played with my young ladies," said "Zenobia."

"Tricks!" exclaimed Stafford. "My dearest madam, it shall be a fair field and no favour—the gentle Beauty shall choose as freely as young Paris himself . . . amongst us divinities, ha!" His ironical eye swept from the insignificance of Sir Thomas to Lord Mandeville's pallid indolent mask; from Spicer's green visage to the red vacuity of the young gentleman from Nor-

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

wich. And he had an agreeable consciousness of the charming figure cut by one Tom Stafford among these assorted rivals. "If kissing goes by favour . . ." thought he, and smiled.

"Well, well," said the placable matron, "indeed, I'm never one to spoil sport — and a kiss never hurt anybody, to my thinking. But, hush, hush!" she warned, finger on lip.

A tall, slender girl came quickly in, her draperies fluttering. She had evidently been interrupted in her disrobing, for her soft brown hair had been almost brushed clear of powder and was coiled in a careless knot at the back of her head. The paint had been washed from her cheek. — A very windflower she looked, white and fragile and yet with a certain woodland strength of her own, amid these high coloured stage-flowers. She seemed very tall, in the long lines of her plain stuff dress; and her throat merged like a flower-stem from the violet folds of the mantle she had thrown across her shoulders.

Lord Mandeville prodded Miss Pommeroy, and then pointed, with his large white forefinger:

"Who is that?" he said suddenly.

[xxxiv]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

"That!" echoed Miss Peggy, with huge scorn. "That," she cried with her coarse giggle, "why that's the Quaker your lordship has wagered to kiss!"

The new comer looked neither to the right nor to the left, she went straight to Mrs. Macnamara.

"You sent for me, madam," said she.

Mr. Stafford had been right: hers was a voice indeed — low-pitched and tender-noted, it seemed to murmur to the heart and yet reached in distinctness to the further recesses of the room. Such a voice alone, in an actress, is genius.

"By gum!" suddenly shouted the young gentleman from Norwich. He was never overcome by shyness, and now, with a stiff lining of Burgundy, felt himself a match for any fine fellow of the company. He elbowed his way between a Beau in puce and the indignant Miss de Vyne. "By gum!" he cried and slapped his thigh: "if it's not Rachel Peace!"

"Rachel Peace," said Lord Mandeville to himself, as if the sound liked him.

"Captain Spicer," cried Stafford, with sharpness, "keep your cub in order, I pray you!"

[xxxv]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

The blood had rushed in a lovely tide to the brow of Rachel Peace; but she kept her eyes steadily on Mrs. Macnamara's face and stood, wrapt in a gentle dignity more closely still than in the folds of her violet cloak.

There was something of a scuffle between Captain Spicer and his young friend, which resulted in the latter's momentary silence. But his mouth was already open for the passage of his next explosive contribution to the dialogue.

"Rachel, my dear," said the good-natured Mrs. Bridget, "I'll not have you hiding away in this fashion when there's laughter, and compliments, and all the things young people like, waiting for you. Here is a friend of mine wants to be introduced—"

"If anything could make me prouder," interrupted Stafford in his pleasant high-bred tones, "than the title of friend, which Mrs. Macnamara so obligingly bestows upon me, it would be, madam," he bowed deep before the girl, "to have the honour of knowing one whose voice—too seldom lifted to-night—has moved this heart in such unwonted fashion."

He laid his hand upon his fine brocaded waistcoat. The girl's glance deepened and

[xxxvi]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

kindled, as she listened to him. Her sensitive face quivered. She looked from him to her protectress and seemed to hesitate between a guileless pleasure and a timid distrust. Lord Mandeville suddenly rose from his seat beside the now sulky Peg and stood gazing at Miss Peace as upon something unknown, undreamed of: his heavy lidded eyes wide open at last.

"Hark to him!" Mrs. Macnamara laughed, pointing at Stafford. "He'd talk the birds off the trees!"

"Ah!" cried that gentleman, "if I could but talk this lady — and yourself — to my poor table to-night . . . !"

"Table?" quoth she, a glitter in her eye.

"A trifle of supper, with my unworthy self as host —?"

"Well," responded Mrs. Bridget comfortably, "I'm not the one to say nay. Supper is always a good thing. We'll come, eh, Rachel?"

All the light had fled from the girl's face. She shrank back. "Indeed, sir . . . I beg you, madam, let me retire. I cannot sup with this gentleman."

"Hoity-toity!" cried madam, as the vision of capon and Sillery faded from her mental

[xxxvii]

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

gaze. 'T is a vast pity, my dear, that you will wear these airs! Oh, forget that you were once a Friend, Rachel Peace, and for Lord's sake be friendly!"

Once more the girl shifted her eyes from Mrs. Macnamara to Mr. Stafford and then back again. Something, perhaps, in the suppressed eagerness of the gentleman's watchful look; something, it might be, of self-betrayal in the dame's greedy lips and her meaning glances, seemed to strike her with horror: she stepped back as if a precipice opened at her feet.

"Indeed," she said quickly, "I must go home."

Her eyes were like a frightened child's. Lord Mandeville caught sight of them, and suddenly there was a throbbing within his breast. Now, this was strange, for it was as well known to himself as to everyone else, that he possessed no heart.

Rachel turned, wrapping her mantle about her; blindly she was seeking an escape, when, at a whisper from Captain Spicer, the young gentleman from Norwich sprang forward playfully to bar her way.

"Dost thee not remember me, Friend?" cried he, and thrust his grinning face close to hers.

[xxxviii]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

She looked from him in disgust and her eye then fell on Sir Thomas, who, at the other side of her, had advanced with skip and jump and a series of inane bows. He had but a vapid mind, this little baronet, a poor taste in garments and a feeble command of attitude; nevertheless, he had been born a gentleman — with another bow, he fell away forthwith.

But an undaunted spark was he of Norwich:

“Ecod!” he pursued, in light and elegant tones of banter. “Is there so much hurry, my dear? By gum, but old Master Peace made a fine to do after you, at Norwich! . . . What will thee give me,” he cried, charmed with his humour, “not to betray the secret?”

Rachel’s face was white; but, with a sudden gathering of strength and dignity, she turned upon him in grave composure.

“I am sorry,” she said — and her wonderful voice vibrated through the room, “but I have no speech to hold with thee, Friend. There is no secret for thee to keep and therefore naught thou canst do for me. Nor is there aught I can offer thee.”

Her answer in that same Quaker phraseol-

[xxxix]

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

ogy, with which she had been thus insolently baited, her delicate serious air, held strange rebuke for one who could feel it. Mr. Stafford lifted the single eye-glass that hung from a ribbon round his neck, to look at her with ever deepening interest. Lord Mandeville came a pace nearer. The young gentleman from Norwich thought the little silence that had fallen on the room could betoken nothing but a flattering attention centred on his next move. He caught Rachel by the elbow.

"What," he cried, "naught? Naught for *me*? Shall I not have the Kiss of Peace?" He paused to look round for admiration.

"Captain Spicer," exclaimed Mr. Stafford with an air of nausea, "that animal of yours is not fit to be let loose!"

Rachel stood like a statue. Peg Pommeroy had clapped her hands with a loud laugh, echoed by some of the other girls from the different corners whither, with their admirers, they had retreated. Stimulated by the sound of this applause Captain Spicer's pupil lurched forward towards the Quaker's disdainful face.

"Unhand her, sir!" deeply ordered Mrs. Macnamara.

[xl]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

Lord Mandeville had taken two long steps. Without a word he extended his arm. His great white hand closed upon the nape of the youth's neck; it was a fine grip. The youth's wig yawned over his cropped head. "Ow!" he cried, and this was all he had breath to cry: he was swung violently backwards, shaken like a rat in the jaws of a terrier, and then released with a twist that sent him plunging into Captain Spicer's lean waistcoat.

The gentlemen of the Little Theatre were prodigiously impressed by my lord's neatness of action. The ladies screeched, or tittered, according to their disposition. Lord Mandeville and Rachel Peace looked upon each other's faces and minded no other in the room.

"Madam," he said, bowing before her with a profounder respect than he had ever shown a duchess, "you wish to retire: my coach is at the door—" Her grave and searching eye darkened with a deep reproach. "Madam," he went on earnestly, as he read her thought, "I shall be honoured if you condescend to make use of it and my horses and servants.—I purpose to return on foot."

Mr. Stafford stood watching with that

[xli]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

smile of his that was at once so genial and so cynical. He saw her, after this single hesitation, lay her slender hand in acquiescence upon Lord Mandeville's wrist. "God help the girl!" thought he. "She's fled from the arms of the bear cub into the lion's jaw. Gad! I've never seen Mandeville so taken. 'Tis a pale child, when all's said and done . . . but, stab me, how she moves!" His experienced eye kindled as he marked the inimitable grace with which this unknown actress paused, to curtsy before Mrs. Macnamara, and then passed on, still led by Lord Mandeville, towards the door.

Here, however, they were arrested by a roar — the young gentleman from Norwich had recovered from his sudden giddiness and found his breath once more.

"Ecod!" he was crying; "I will have blood for this!"

His stout red face looked so exceeding comic without the shade of his wig that Stafford was seized with laughter. But Captain Spicer, whose usually astute intellect had been to-night somewhat troubled by the fumes of the bottle, now grasped the situation with a return of sobered wits. A quarrel with Lord Mandeville! His fool of a recruit

❧ THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE ❧

could come but poorly out of any such pass, and the gallant Captain's deeply interested exchequer could allow of no such risk.

"Blood?" he echoed shrilly. "No, sir, no blood here, but marrow-bones!" He caught the youth sharply by the shoulder: "Are you mad?" he hissed in his ear. "Don't you know who 't is you're talking to? 'T is the famous Lard Mandeville, you booby. You must apalagize."

"Apologise . . ." cried the unhappy young gentleman. "I? Apologise. . . ?"

"He's had too mach wine, my lard. Why, what a sight the fallow is!—Where's your wig, sir. You are making a laughing-stack of yourself—and of me!"

Here the irate Captain plucked the wig from one of the actors, who was convulsing Miss Peggy by some merry antic with the same. He clapped it fiercely on his pupil's poll; with so much disregard to symmetry, however, that the cue came to the front and effectively choked further protest.

Rachel's lips broke into a delicious smile. Mandeville, who could not move his eyes from her face, even for one contemptuous glance towards his victim—although he had halted to hear what this latter might have to

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

say in the way of further challenge — proceeded again unmoved towards the door. He had once more ceremoniously taken the Quaker's hand. As the panels closed upon them, Stafford fell likewise into sudden gravity upon the memory of Rachel's smile. "By heaven," he said to himself, "Mandeville is a connoisseur: the creature is exquisite!"

"So, gentlemen," said he aloud, cheerfully, as he turned once more to the company, "we have lost the wager."

"You, at least, made but a poor race for it, Mr. Stafford," said hungry Mrs. Macnamara in dudgeon. Then: "And you, girls," she cried with asperity, "shame on you to be loitering like this! Some of you will be called in a minute. Miss Pommeroy, you're for the curtain, if you please."

Captain Spicer and his recruit from Norwich were wrangling in a corner. And, presently, the young gentleman was observed to shed tears: Spicer had actually threatened to abandon him.

"What would become of you, if I did not keep my eyes on you!" rated the Captain.

"Captain Spicer's eyes are more useful than most people's," said Stafford, sooth-

❖ THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE ❖

ingly, "he can see both sides of things at once. And 'tis a prodigious advantage, sir."

.
The slope of the Haymarket was being scoured by the rain of a September tempest. The gutters were rushing streams, the black roofs dripping. Foul old London was pure for an hour; the moist air vivifying. Rachel, on Lord Mandeville's arm, halted involuntarily under the porch.

"Oh," she cried, "how fresh, how clean, after that scent, that heat of the green-room! . . . Oh," she added, breathing deep, "if it were not for my art!" The exclamation seemed to have escaped her. Quickly she recollected herself and turned to him. "Nay," she said now, "it is raining still. I pray you, call me a sedan and keep your coach, sir."

And, for the first time that evening, Lord Mandeville in his turn smiled.

"A little rain will not hurt me," he said gently. "Nay, nay, 'tis I pray you. My running footman shall escort you—you shall tell him yourself where you wish to be driven. I do prefer to walk."

If she had a lingering doubt of him, it

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

then vanished. She stepped into his coach, the Quaker girl, as the Queen into her state carriage. And it pleased him to bend before her, as before majesty itself. But he paused at the coach window, looking in upon her lingeringly, and could not bring himself to give the signal for driving on. The light from the footman's link and the lamps of the portal fell full upon her face.—He thought his eyes had never beheld anything so fair.

"How come you," he said after a while, "how come you, Rachel Peace, on the boards of a Play-House?"

The soft eyes, fixed upon his, shone as through a mist of tears they would not shed. Her lips quivered. He tightened his hand upon the ledge of the coach window to keep back the mad impulse of seizing her to his breast.

"Oh, I have done wrong, I know," she said. "I fear I have broken my father's heart. But I cannot go back—I cannot!" A sudden passion shook her; she wrung her slender hands. "Sir," she cried, "I have no mother . . . I cannot think that God meant that we should live such lives—God who made all the things beautiful and gave us

[xlv]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

eyes to see, lips for laughter. Oh, you in the world, who see in the odd ways of Quakers nothing but food for jest . . . could you but know the long tragedy of a Quaker home to the young soul,—I believe it might rather draw your tears!”

Lord Mandeville, though he had a sense of humour of his own, found nothing comic that he, of all men, should be selected for this confidence. And truly there must have been, even in his silence, some strange quality of sympathy; for, after a pause, the girl, with the thrill of unshed tears in her golden voice, went on :

“But, I could have borne it. My father is a just man; and, though mere justice is cold comfort, I could have borne to bide with him—had he been content that I should do so.”

She shuddered and fell silent.

“He wanted to wed you, against your will,” said Mandeville, by some quick intuition of an indignant mind leaping at her story.

“Oh,” she answered quickly, “it was to a worthy man—a Friend of great standing among us, of many virtues. My father meant well, doubtless. But I—it would

[xlvii]

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

have been a crime! Sir, I was forced to break the Commandment and disobey my father, for I carry in my heart another Commandment, and it I could not violate."

The passion had come back upon her. Her velvet eye flashed, and the gathering tears suddenly fell and rolled down her cheeks. Mandeville leaned in, and whispered:

"You could not wed where you did not love?"

"Verily, I would rather die."

"And, verily, it is well said," he answered. And there was no mockery, but a deep earnestness, in his echo of her asseveration. "And so," he added, after a pause, "poor Quaker dove, your white wings have taken you among all these painted birds, these jays and peacocks — these Pommeroyes, these de Vynes and Mortemars" — Once again there came a silence between them. Then, glancing down, he said suddenly and with a change of tone: "'T was the easiest flight, perhaps, and doubtless —"

"Nay, nay," she interposed, "do not so mistake me. I would hold it shame, now, having taken my life into my own hands, did I not employ it, for I believe Heaven

[xlviii]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

meant me so to do.—Sir, I know I have my talent, and I will not bury it: now that I am free I would use it. Mrs. Macnamara has been kind to me . . . in her way. . . . I knew her daughter at home. I am already earning a small salary, and she——” Rachel hesitated a moment and an arch smile crept on her lip, “she instructs me.”

“She!” said Mandeville, with his short loud laugh. Once more he gazed deeply on the girl in his coach; but, this time, it was with a new point of view. Every inflection of her voice, from passion to pathos, from earnestness to delicate mirth, lingered in his ear like to the strains of music. He remembered her rare gesture, the grace of her every movement. Beneath his gaze, even now as she sat silent, watching him, the shadows of her thoughts were passing upon her countenance as the clouds over a clear lake—— Ranting, strutting old Macnamara, teach her! “’T is you,” he cried suddenly, “shall teach the world!”

As he spoke, he meant a lordly promise. The Earl of Mandeville had powerful interest in most worlds . . . But she caught his words only as an encouragement to the artist;

d

[xlix]

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

and such a beautiful gratitude leaped to her face that he bit his tongue over the coarse proffer of patronage which would have spoilt all.

“ Oh, sir, if *you* think something of my gifts, then shall I hope. But, indeed, I had but a poor part to-night — ”

She had had a part—and he had not seen her! He had sat by Miss Peggy Pommeroy, all that precious time, wondering that life could hold so much tedium. Had there ever been such a waste of an evening!

As he leaned into the coach the rain pattered on his back, hissed into the torches of the linkmen, striped in long slants and snake-lines the farther windows of the coach. From gutter and cobble-stone, roof and pavement, rang out the song of the rain. Ever and anon would come a flying gust and all the lights of torch and lantern would bend, burn blue and madly dance. Lord Mandeville's horses stamped and shivered and shook the harness. But his lordship himself had no thought but to marvel on the snowdrop beauty of the face of Rachel Peace when the lights and shadows played on it. All at once his silence and his brooding

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

eye seemed to frighten her — she drew back, with a look that woke him too from his dream. He instantly moved from the window.

“You would go home,” he said, formally.
“Madam, I wish you good-night.”

At this, in her woman’s way, her heart seemed to smite her that, by unworthy apprehension, she had wronged one so generously courteous.

“Nay,” said she, eagerly arresting him, “one word more. — Friend, may I not know by what name to remember thee?” Then, she blushed and begged him excuse her for that, in spite of all her self-schooling, the old language still came easiest to her tongue.

He broke in abruptly, vowing it was the sweetest he had ever heard; then interrupted himself, afraid of his own vehemence. Here was a flower that scarce could withstand a touch: he caught back at his highest air of ceremony.

“Madam, I have to crave your pardon. I am remiss indeed not to have introduced myself. My name is Mandeville.” He drew himself up and bowed; then, looking at her, saw, half piqued and half amused, that the

[li]

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

name of which England thought so much had no meaning in her ear. "I am," he went on, with a sort of awkwardness, yet proudly too, "Lionel Hill-Dare, Earl of Mandeville." And he added with emphasis: "at your service."

"My lord, I did not need the sound of your name nor the sight of the coronet on your coach, to tell me that you are great and noble. Amongst us, Friends, the outward show is little, but the deeds of the generous heart are much . . . Good-night, my lord."

Her white fingers now clasped the window frame where his own had rested. He extended his hand.

"Will you then not say: 'Good-night . . . Friend?'"

At this she smiled, that smile of exquisite archness that had already bereft him of his senses.

"Good-night, Friend, and thank thee!" said she, and laid her slim cool hand in his.

He stooped and kissed it.

.

As he stood, his back against the grimy

[lii]

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE

pillars of the Theatre porch, and watched his coach clattering up the Haymarket, the red torch leaping as the footman ran beside it, all through the downpour, his whole being was aglow. — Lord Mandeville the *roué* had found something in himself he had not known he possessed; and, as his coach rounded the corner and was lost to his sight this thing that he had discovered, behold! 't was gone from him. She was carrying it away with her. He had given it — nay, had flung it into her pretty hands, this hitherto unknown possession of Lord Mandeville — his heart.

.

When Mr. Stafford emerged from the Theatre, he absolutely started to see the motionless figure leaning against the pillar. For once, his knowledge of the world was at fault; for once, events had prepared for him a genuine surprise. A sharp exclamation escaped him.

Lord Mandeville turned his dreaming eyes, saw the amazed countenance and read the thought behind it.

"Sir," said he, and took his hat from his head with a certain grandeur of gesture that he could assume at times, "I beg to inform

[liii]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

you, and kindly yourself pass the news to your companions, that I have not won the wager."

He turned, replaced his hat, and, pensively, walked away in the rain.





I

WHEN Mistress Bellairs, the toast of Bath "for wit and beauty" — and one of the richest matches in the kingdom besides — consented to marry Mr. Stafford, it was a nine days' wonder. True, he was a prodigious buck and her name had been connected with that of many a less eligible suitor. Nevertheless, "Why does she do it?" was the question on every lip.

And, indeed, it was the question that the pretty little widow was asking herself as she sat warming her slippered foot before a cosy wood fire on the eve of her wedding day. The reason she had given to the world at large, "that it had become absolutely necessary for her to have a protector," had taken in nobody — least of all herself.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Kitty Bellairs was right well capable of taking care of herself and, moreover, enjoyed the process. The reason she had given to Miss Lydia, her tire-woman (a personage, by the way, who highly disapproved of the intended alliance) had been received by that respectfully irate damsel with a sniff that spoke volumes of scepticism.

"The poor fellow, Lydia! He is so desperately enamoured: I had not the heart to say him nay."

"Yes, ma'am. There's others besides yourself have always told me he was a feeling gentleman."

Mistress Bellairs averted her head from the challenging flame of Lydia's eye. She knew all about the little French milliner in Quiet Street; she did not choose to have the story again. And now, surveying in a melancholy manner the toes of her small pointed shoes in the flickering firelight, with the dusk of the October evening pressing close round her, she could find no excuse for her own folly.

Upon one side or the other she could scarce plead *entrainement*. She had been flattered by Mr. Stafford's persistent besieging, and yet piqued by feeling how little real

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

passion she had been able to inspire. The moment when, in due form, he had laid his hand and heart at her feet had been one of rosy triumph: from Lydia upwards, how many a female well-wisher had dinned into her ear that Stafford had no serious intentions! She had cut out the little milliner in Quiet Street. And yet — was it possible that Kitty Bellairs was giving up liberty, money, and something finer and closer, for such an advantage?

Her friends had freely prophesied that it would be with this engagement of hers as with one or two others; those with my Lord Verney and Mr. Denis O'Hara (Lord Kilcrouney's only son) for instance; and bets circulated freely in Pump and Assembly rooms upon Mr. Stafford's chances of being jilted like his predecessors. But "Beau Stafford," despite the most genial laugh in the whole of the west country, had (or so Mistress Kitty fancied) a cold eye. She shuddered a little as she thought upon it now. Yes, she was almost afraid of him!

Someone came stumbling into the room and fell on the floor at her feet. Her hand was seized and mumbled over with kisses,

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

and the firegleams danced on a red curly head, insufficiently powdered.

Kitty smiled and her black eye softened. This Denis O'Hara, this impoverished mad-cap Irishman — with him she had once been as near marriage as now with Mr. Stafford! And if an ingrained prudence had made her, at the eleventh hour, prorogue the ceremony *sine die*, she had nevertheless beheld its approach with little of that dismay which now filled her soul.

"Kitty, you've broken my heart on me! Kitty, Kitty, I never thought you'd let it go so far. Is there no hope at all, asthore? Is it bent you are on going to the bitter end? Sure, then, I don't care what becomes of me, and the sheriff's officers that are after me this minute may have me at long last, and devil mend them!"

Unfortunate Denis! But for that last despairing admission, who knows into what rashness Kitty might not have been tempted, in this twilight mood? But the sheriff's officers — *cela donnait furieusement à penser!* She let her little taper fingers rest for a second caressingly within his.

"Don't be so foolish," she said. Though her voice was tender, in her heart she

❖ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❖

thought — “What a pity he should be so impossible — a scattercash, a money sieve!”

“Foolish!” exclaimed the lover with a break in his voice. “Say mad, and you’ll be nearer the mark.” Then he cast himself flat on the hearthrug and shed such heart-broken tears that Kitty’s own eyes caught the infection. And he, rising to his knees, on a sudden, saw the pearly drops upon her cheek. Very little pearls they were — quite seed pearls, if the truth must be told — but so precious in her lover’s estimation that he had to gather them with reverence and wonder upon his lips.

“Don’t cry, Kitty, dear!” said he, forgetting his huge sorrow at the sight of her butterfly grief. “Sure, I’m not worth it! I was not fit to be your husband, my darling, though it’s the love of the world I’d have given you. Ned Stafford’s a good fellow — blast him! — and it’s careful he’ll be with your money on you.”

Kitty gave a tiny sob. It was very, very hard on poor Denis: there was perhaps no one that was better able to judge of the magnitude of his loss than she herself. The sound of that sob drove a wave of blood

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

to O'Hara's giddy head. He clasped her fiercely to his breast.

"Ah, but by the Lord, we were near it once! Ah, Kitty, why, in God's name——"

He finished his sentence with his lips upon hers. Kitty's heart beat quick as a fluttering bird; an agitation overpowering, yet not unpleasant, seized hold of her. Even now, if only——

But, as abruptly as he had seized her, the impulsive Irishman loosened his grasp, sprang to his feet and dashed to the door:

"The night of your wedding will be Denis O'Hara's last day upon earth."

"Fudge!" cried Kitty, in a sudden fit of exasperation.

Denis flung himself out of the room. With the touch of those soft lips flaming into his soul he did not dare trust himself another instant in her presence; believed, indeed, that he had already sinned beyond forgiveness. When will a man, even the most practised in the science of love, ever really learn how to deal with a woman's heart?

"Fool!" said Mistress Bellairs to herself as the sound of his retreating steps died away in the passage. "I vow I shall

❖ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❖

go on with it now . . . and 'tis his own fault!"

Mr. O'Hara rushed blindly into the vestibule and into the arms of Miss Lydia who had but just turned away from closing the hall door. She caught him by the wrists with small bony hands.

"For your life, sir," said she in an important whisper, "you must not leave the house!" Drunk with his despair he stared at her. "They've seen you go in," she went on. "Front and back doors are watched."

"Oh, that!" said Denis O'Hara, and tossed his head. "Sure, what do I care? Ah, my little Lydia, it's to be married to-morrow she is, and I'll not survive it! And what odds is it to me once I'm dead and done with it, if I'm in quod in the morning?"

"She's not married yet," suggested the maid.

Again O'Hara stared at her; then his whole countenance became irradiated.

"Why, Lydia!"

She put her finger to her lip, looked round cautiously, and whispered in his ear:

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Come with me."

Like a lamb (as he said when subsequently describing the scene) the Hon. Denis O'Hara suffered himself to be led to Miss Lydia's own virginal bower. She locked the door, and they were alone. A compromising situation! But (as Denis said) nothing could have been more virtuous, at that moment, than the pair of them.

"Oh, alanna!" said he, catching her trim waist, "if you've put a spoke in the wheels of that most ill-considered alliance, it's more than my life I'll owe you. What have you got to tell me, darling?" he went on eagerly. "It's broken off already, maybe? And the little devil — God bless her! — only playing with my poor heart, as usual? Or" — for Lydia had shaken her head — "will she do it to-night, or will she fail him at the church door?"

"None of these things, as far as I know, are likely to occur this time."

"What, then, in the name of wonder?"

"I place my trust in Providence," said Miss Lydia, piously casting up her eyes.

"Ah, it's a fool you're making of me!" cried Mr. O'Hara in an angry voice, as he turned away in disappointment.

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

"I should n't like to speak ill of the dead," retorted Lydia acidly; "and, indeed, if all your man says is true, your late respected mother was a very elegant lady—but if you've been made a fool, Mr. O'Hara, sir, it is not I that am responsible!"

The worst of Denis, as he was fond of admitting, was that he could never resist a joke. Sore at heart as he was, and impudent as were the girl's look and words, he burst into appreciative laughter. Such humour indeed must be suitably rewarded. And if Mr. O'Hara's guineas were scarce, he was always provided with a kiss for a pretty woman.

"Will you remember, sir, where you are!" cried Lydia, struggling like a kitten, all her claws out, yet with no intention of scratching.

"And in what better place could I be?" cried the gallant gentleman. But the next minute, overcome once more by his misery, he broke off abruptly, sank in a chair and looked round with haggard eye.

Miss Lydia lived near the rose. She had literally, indeed, a good deal of the scent of the rose about her, for she considered herself entitled to the common use of her mistress's

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

flacons. She had, moreover, assimilated many of Kitty's little ways; and her room was as dainty as the lady's own, with many pretty belongings hallowed by previous use.

Mr. O'Hara groaned softly. Miss Lydia whisked round upon him, rubbing her lip with a business-like hand and showing a colour like a cherry in each cheek.

"Now, look you, Mr. O'Hara, sir," said she, bustling, "this is no time for philanderings . . . nor for groans either. You don't wish my mistress to be married to-morrow. Neither do I. I have my reasons. A man, that's as good as married already! It shan't be and it can't. There's they that have the right to claim him at the altar. Hush!"

Kitty's voice was ringing from below in clear call for Lydia. O'Hara clasped his hands in some anxiety of mind and cast a look at the window; but the damsel, after a momentary pause, proceeded calmly in a rapid undertone:

"And there's no time for questions either. Enough that I'd as soon the sheriff's men did not get you to-night. My lady might want you yet—and I might want you. There, there, be quiet, I tell you! You'll not rue it, if you do as I bid you at once."

❧ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❧

She began to move about the room, deliberately busy; opened a press here, a drawer there, took out sundry garments; considered, selected, put back, talking the while with perfect imperturbability.

"The puce silk pelisse which my lady bought when she was after Lord Verney, and thought to look sober for the dowager and my Lady Maria. Neither of us ever wore it. It is a little too good, perhaps; but there, it's such a quiet colour! The bonnet we wore, second mourning, for 'old Bellairs. It got rained on, too! 'T will suit beautifully. The kerchief. Eh?" She paused and ran her eye over the young man's petrified figure. "A skirt?" she said. "A skirt—what the mischief!"

She seized an ancient damask petticoat and measured it against him. He looked at his own long protruding legs—and a slow grin spread itself upon his face. The call bell at the head of the bed rang with a peremptory jerk. Lydia glanced at it sideways and proceeded:

"'T is the devil you're so tall! Stay—I have the very thing."

She rushed to the press, plunged into its depths and emerged, shaking a voluminous

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

garment of shot purple and copper hue that made a great crackling.

"Cook's best," she stated briefly. "I promised to put a bit of braid on it for her. Poor servants, sir—we have to do each other a good turn now and again. 'T is not that she's so much taller than myself, but she takes it up in breadth."

The bell rang again, a double peal this time. The Abigail did not even turn her head.

"I'll request you to take off that coat. Yes, sir, and your waistcoat, too."

She slipped a wadded skirt from her chosen heap over his head, and exclaimed at the size of his waist. Snips and stitches had to come in aid. But no sooner had she clothed him in "cook's best" than the lively damsel anathematised his leanness.

"No more on you," she exclaimed, once more at work for bare life, "than on one of your own Irish red herrings! How in the world——? Well, there, then we must just stuff, I suppose! There's all my mistress's stockings that I was packing for her—she'll not need them, I'll take care of that; but you'll have to give them back to me—Drat that bell!"

❧ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❧

In a twinkling Mr. O'Hara found himself seated before the dressing-table, Lydia's hands busy in the thick curls of his hair.

"Cook favours a plain style," quoth Lydia.

"Mercy!" cried Mr. O'Hara, suddenly waking up and wincing, "what a fright you're making of me, child."

"Do you want your beauty to be recognised about the streets?" said Miss Lydia in her dry way. And as she spoke she smeared a dab of pomade on either side of the bandeaux and surveyed her handiwork with much satisfaction.

"Now," quoth she, "for your face. I hope I can paint a face with any tire-woman in England. Some of the eye-brow-brown mixed with the rouge, as near cook's own tone as I can get it, and as little eye-brow as possible."

Her hands flew. O'Hara fell into a dream; there was something soothing in the manipulation. Then, upon a sudden thought:

"Did you ever use these implements on your mistress's face?" he asked.

And, as Lydia told him "yes," with a sharp, sidelong glance, she saw him kiss the old

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

hare's-foot as it passed his lips and laughed half scornfully, half pityingly.

Mrs. Bellairs' negro boy had been knocking at Miss Lydia's door for full five minutes, and shrilly clamouring, before, with a flounce and a whisk, she admitted him.

"Have n't you been taught better," she cried, tweaking his wool with practised fingers, "than to disturb ladies in their conversation?"

"Missus," began the boy, whimpering; then broke off to stare aghast at the huge, forbidding female who now rose and advanced upon him. As he met the gaze of a pair of mad, light eyes, dancing in the candle light out of the raddled and haggard face, Pompey gave a howl and fairly took to his heels.

"A body may n't have her own aunts visit her, next!" growled Lydia after him, through the open door, tying on her outer garments as she spoke with jerky energy. "This way, Aunt Eliza, dear, and mind the step."

O'Hara, smothering laughter till he grew purple under the paint, followed, in outer meekness, his bustling guide. As they

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

passed the parlour door, it was suddenly flung open:

"Upon my word, miss," cried Kitty, "and this is pretty behaviour! Pray, where may you have been, the while I have been calling till I was hoarse, and ringing till my arm ached?"

"Ringing, ma'am!" echoed the innocent Abigail. "Did you indeed? The bells in this house — they're a scandal! My Aunt Eliza, ma'am, from Wales, of whom, you'll remember, I've often told you. My poor mother's only sister." Lydia gave her favourite sniff, which this time signified pathos. Rarely had she more thoroughly enjoyed a situation. "She arrived to see me, unexpected, this evening — and if you'll allow me, I should like, with your permission, to go out for half-an-hour."

The gleam in Lydia's eyes somewhat marred the humility of this request. There was a certain point, Mistress Kitty knew, beyond which she did not dare go in her dealings with her confidential maid. She tossed her head discontentedly: "Not more than half-an-hour, then."

As she was turning away her careless eye glance fell upon Lydia's aunt, became fixed and widened with amaze. The huge figure in

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

cook's best, modestly drooped its head till the plumes that had mourned for "old Bellairs" fell forward unrecognised over the shaded countenance; and "Aunt Eliza" began a series of spasmodic dips, faithfully copied from the countrywomen in the market place of Bath.

Mrs. Bellairs whisked back into the parlour and slammed the door. How dared Lydia have such extraordinary belongings?

Lydia nipped her relative's arm with exceeding sharpness as they emerged on Queen Square.

"Now don't be more of a fool than you can help . . . and for Gracious sake" (her nails nearly met in his flesh) "don't take strides like that. Don't turn your head — there are your men under the trees opposite."

Fortunately the square was sparsely lit, and the wits of the sheriff's officers none of the keenest. The bulky female who minced along with nodding feathers was only stared at in stupid amusement and allowed to go by unmolested.

"Where are you bringing me to, darling?" whispered O'Hara hoarsely as they rounded the dangerous corner. And his arm, irrepressible still, despite disguise, began to

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

creep round the sprightly figure. "I hope it's not far; for much as I love the petticoats, they don't take kindly to me this way at all."

"I'm bringing you to a friend," answered the other with stern repression. "It's not likely she'll want to be bothered with you, for she's in trouble herself, but" — she halted, while suspicion and vindictiveness glistened in her eye — "you'll have to give me your word, sir, that there will be no philandering in that house to-night. If not, I wash my hands of you. I'm not going to have had all this bother for nothing."

"I give you my word, I'll be as good as gold," solemnly declared O'Hara, awake once more to the graver issues of the venture. Too well did he know the power of the tire-woman in her mistress's councils.

"Then you'll keep to your room, and behave, till you hear from me again. And here we are now."

It was the end of Quiet Street. O'Hara stared at the round jutting bow-window, lit up behind its lace curtains, and barely restrained himself from whistling aloud.

"Ned Stafford's little French milliner!"

The plot was thickening.

.
2 [17]

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

A small, slim thing, of squirrel-like nimbleness and brightness of eye, this same Madame Eglantine. But the bright glance to-night was dim, and the olive cheek tear-roughened, as the lady came herself to the door to answer the knock.

Leaving the aunt from Wales unceremoniously in the narrow passage, Lydia darted upon her friend and drew her into the shop; whence the sound of a long whispered colloquy, broken by little explosions, sometimes of laughing, sometimes of crying, penetrated to the listener's ear. At last Lydia returned, very tight and determined.

"I shall be here about ten o'clock to-morrow," she said as she passed O'Hara; then added in a fierce whisper: "You may take off your disguise, so long as you don't hang out of the window. And please to remember, sir, to be careful with cook's best paduasoy and my mantle, unless you wish me to repent of my good nature."

"Vill you come dis vay, please, me lady?" said Madame Eglantine, beckoning to him, while between their swollen lids her black eyes shot a gleam of such mirth and mischief at him that he was hard set to keep his promise of "behaviour."

❧ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❧

Keep it, however, he did; met with an unmoved gravity the sudden friendliness with which the pretty Frenchwoman laughingly surveyed him so soon as they were alone together in the neat garret allotted to him; met with the same stolid irresponsiveness her fresh change of mood, when, wiping the corner of her pretty eye with her lace apron, she hinted, with head engagingly on one side, that heaven knew *she* had no desire to be making pleasantries, and that nobody's heart could be more completely broken than her own.

Mr. O'Hara was not aware how greatly his solemn demeanour added to the comicality of his appearance; nor did Madame Eglantine herself seem to realise it, for there was very little amusement in the petulant look she finally flung upon him, and in the dry manner in which she remarked: "that she would derange monsieur no longer and would send up his supper, in due course."

"Pity!" thought the gentleman to himself, as the door closed upon the wave of a tempestuous petticoat. "Sure it would n't have done a ha'p'orth of harm to anyone, if me and that darling little soul had deluded our troubles for a while by a smile and a

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

tear together. But, there, I've given me word. God help Lydia's husband! I fear she's the born old maid!"

He took an impatient turn up and down the room, then suddenly catching sight of his countenance in the little square of glass hanging on the wall, seized a candle and drew near to gaze.

"Faith," he laughed, "I'm the holy show, and that's the truth!"

Suddenly the eyes gazing into the mirror became fixed, the grinning countenance overspread with a deep gravity. Full a minute or so Mr. O'Hara remained motionless, contemplating some inward vision. He passed a forefinger dubiously over his chin, then, lost in reflection, he walked over to the little bed and sat down on the edge of it.

A small, sharp, charity girl staggered in with a tray and stared with cunning eyes at the strange figure.

"Look here, child," said O'Hara suddenly, "I'll give you a whole crown piece . . . next week, if you'll bring me a jug of hot water to-morrow morning, and if you can beg, borrow or steal a razor for me at the same time — and, stop, a packet of face-powder."

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

If it had been his own wedding morn instead of that of Mr. Stafford, the Hon. Denis O'Hara could not have bestowed more care upon the shaving of his handsome chin. It was a haggard face that looked into the glass, still strangely crowned by feminine bandeaux of hair: for Mr. O'Hara, having his own reasons for desiring to preserve Lydia's handiwork undamaged, had spent the night, not in bed, but in uneasy dozing upon a high chair.

This business accomplished, he next proceeded to set to rights the embarrassing garments—a somewhat uncertain proceeding, attended by a good deal of fumbling with unfamiliar hooks and eyes, and a good deal of subdued cursing. When the stiff kerchief had been refolded across his artificially buxom figure, Mr. O'Hara stationed himself once again before the mirror. And now all the experience culled behind the scenes—in ladies' boudoir or the playhouse—was brought to bear upon the situation.

With the aid of the packet faithfully provided by the serving maid, and a great deal of friction, he succeeded in producing a truly interesting pallor. An artistic loosening of Lydia's coiffure, with a cloud of powder,

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

next created such an improvement that Mr. O'Hara, surveying himself knowingly, was pleased to observe that he would not have made such an ill-looking female after all! And, when his labours were crowned by the nodding plumes and a gracefully-disposed lace veil:

"I defy anyone," he cried joyfully, "to say I don't look the image of respectability—for once."

Then he pulled his flexible mouth into lines of woe.

"Afflicted respectability," he added, with approval.

All the chimes and church clocks of the old grey town were ringing out eight in the morning when O'Hara, with the most genteel gait imaginable, emerged from the doors of the little milliner and directed his steps towards a ladies' chocolate-house opposite the Abbey. There he spent his last white piece on a cup of coffee, and took great satisfaction in the fact that his appearance evoked but a passing curiosity.

"They think I am just a fine figure of a woman," he told himself, with an inward chuckle.

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

Punctually upon the chime of a quarter to eleven, a coach, drawn by a shining pair of horses, halted with important clatter at the Orange Grove entrance of the Abbey. My Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells stepped out, followed by an attendant Canon; was received in due state by several minor dignitaries and conducted into the vestry. It was a bright gusty morning and his skirts fluttered against his handsome purple legs as they moved in dignity from coach to porch. A noble-looking prelate — Kitty Bellairs could not have been married in Bath by any lesser personage — and, this morning, filled with the condescending urbanity of one ready to rejoice with those who rejoiced!

No sooner had he crossed the threshold than the Abbey bells set up a mad clangour of chimes.

"Quite a notable event this, Mr. Selwyn," said the Bishop, affably addressing the Dean.

"Indeed so, my lord," quoth the Dean, a pretty mouse-grey man, rubbing his hands till they almost crackled. "The Abbey is full of our most elegant visitors."

"The lady — ah — is possessed of considerable — ah — personal attractions."

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"It is so reputed, my lord."

"And I believe," said the Bishop, "of no mean fortune."

"Vastly rich, they say, my lord."

"Then," said his lordship waggishly, "the bridegroom is indeed (as our fashionable youths might say) a lucky dog."

Before the Dean, the Canon, and the minor clerics had at all mastered their appreciation of this episcopal sally there came a loud knocking at the door—and, upon the verger proceeding to open it, a colloquy ensued outside which soon became of so earnest a nature as to attract the Dean's attention.

"What is this, Jenkinson?"

"Please, Mr. Dean, sir, there's a lady demanding to see his lordship in private. I've told her, sir, it's quite impossible; his lordship is robing."

"But I must see his lordship—'t is most urgent." The strained, high-pitched voice smote the Dean with further amazement. "I must see his lordship!"

And the lady, pushing open the door with remarkable ease against the efforts of the verger, made good her footing inside the reverend circle. Dean and Canon fell back

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

in some dismay before the imposing female figure that entered among them with this sweeping energy, but the prelate frowned and advanced sternly to meet her.

"This intrusion, madam——"

The lady rolled upon him (from over the folds of a voluminous handkerchief) an eye laden with so much tragedy that the Bishop was instantly impressed.

"Your lordship," said she, sinking her high note of distress into one that matched the expression of her gaze, "had I waited but five minutes later to seek you it would have been too late; a crime——"

"How now!" exclaimed his lordship, quick to seize the inference, "do you mean, madam?—tut, tut, 'tis impossible. This marriage——?"

"Alas!" cried the new-comer with a stifled sob and buried her face more completely.

This was a case of genuine distress or Dr. Thurlow had little knowledge of an unhappy world. An agitated hand plucked him by his lawn sleeve as he advanced still closer to the weeping unknown.

"Your lordship, the bride is arriving."

There was another jangle of joy-bells. The stranger moaned.

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

"The bride must wait then, sir," said the Bishop, and looked rebukingly round upon the curious faces that pressed nearer. "Stand back, gentlemen," he commanded. "I must speak a few words with this lady in private."

"Upon my word," whispered the Canon to the Dean as, slightly huffed, they withdrew, "this is an odd business."

"It bodes ill," quoth the Dean, wagging his little head till the powder flew, "for the 'lucky dog's' marriage to-day!"

"Pooh!" said the Canon, as he propped his burly form against the great carved oak press. "That creature, that grenadier of a woman — an adventuress, I'll warrant!"

"An adventuress! I am not so sure. Watch her now, Mr. Selwyn. 'Tis some weighty story she pours into his lordship's ear. And mark you his countenance."

"She has a fine pair of eyes and knows how to roll them," whispered the Canon drily.

Then they nudged each other; but the meaning smiles faded from their countenance as the mysterious stranger's voice was raised in broken accents, and the pathetic announcement: "Six living, your lordship, and

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

one underground!" was delivered in tones audible enough to reach all their ears. These tones were of rich Irish quality.

The Bishop also raised his voice, shocked out of his first impulse of discretion.

"Fie, fie! This is a terrible scandal. It is a pity that matters should have been allowed to go so far."

"Sure I only crossed last night. And a terrible tossing ——"

"Tut, tut! To the point, madam! If, indeed, a previous marriage ceremony has really taken place ——"

"In Ballybrophy Church, your lordship, nine years ago next Patrick's Day, as sure as I am a living wo——"

The Bishop extended his pastoral hand with a deprecating gesture and turned to beckon to his subordinates. His countenance was seamed with lines of care, yet bore an expression of not altogether ungratified importance.

"Mr. Dean," he said gravely, "I see no help for it: we must request Mr. Stafford's presence here immediately."

As he spoke, the joy-bells, which had been but faintly jangling the last few minutes, suddenly fell into silence; and, after a dead

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

little pause, the solemn chimes gave forth the hour of eleven.

Mistress Bellairs had been waiting some time in vain for the officiating clergy, before the eyes of all fashionable Bath, and by the side of a slightly anxious bridegroom. She had arrived at the Abbey in none too good a humour; and for every second of delay accumulated fresh vials of resentment against the innocent partner of her discomfiture. But when this latter was fetched away from the altar steps by a solemn-faced gentleman in a surplice and the subdued amazement of her guests broke into loud whispers and titters, her fury grew almost unbearable.

Miss Lydia, screened behind a monument (sufficiently near the altar to keep a keen eye upon the progress of events) had not been so sensible of the flight of time; for she was engaged in animated discussion with her companion — a small woman whose dark, tear-stained face was almost hidden under a hood.

"I tell you," she was repeating impatiently for about the twentieth time, "you 've nothing to be afraid of. Lord, Madame Eglantine,

❧ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❧

don't be such a fool! 'Tis all as easy as kissing. Ought n't I to know my mistress's mind? Why, I tell you she's only longing for the excuse — for any excuse. If he'd given her a pretext no bigger than the black of my nail she'd jump at it. She does not really want to be married, no more to him than to anyone. And if you work your bit of scandal ——”

“ Ah, Miss Lydia,” said the little French-woman, trembling from head to foot, “ I shall be know and I shall be ruin !”

“ Ruined, you mean-spirited thing! cried Lydia in angry despair. “ Is that what you're thinking on at the last moment? And will you let your beau be snapped away when you can keep him by stretching out your hand? Well, I declare, I'm prodigious sorry I ever took all this trouble about you. If you'd even had the sense to keep an eye on Mr. O'Hara, as I told you — him as I meant to have ready to snatch her off in her coach as soon as we had scored the first trick. A nice fool I was to trust either of you! Ruined, you little French zany, why, how could you be ruined? All you have to do is to keep your hood over your face and whisper in the lady's ear; she won't

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

be so anxious to show your little muzzle to the world."

"The bell have stop!" interrupted the Frenchwoman suddenly.

Lydia craned a long neck round the monument. Presently she turned back, bursting with excitement.

"I declare," she cried, "something's up! They've fetched Mr. Stafford away from the very altar. And there's the bride all alone. Well!" Then, as such born generals generally are, she was seized with the inspiration of the emergency. "Now is your moment!" she whispered, gripping Madame Eglantine fiercely. "Go and tell your story in my mistress's ear; and, if this wedding goes on, I'm a Dutchwoman! Tell her he's promised you marriage, mind . . . We must stretch a point sometimes."

When Denis O'Hara saw Mr. Stafford's puzzled face following in the wake of the usher's portentously set countenance, he had reached that stage of what he would himself have described as "devilment," in which a man becomes quite reckless of consequences. No sooner had the bridegroom crossed the threshold of the vestry than he flung himself

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

headlong upon the beruffled bosom, and the mad mirth he had so long suppressed broke out in hysterical gasps and sobs.

Clutched in a strangulating embrace, overwhelmed by the suddenness of the attack and the physical weight of the demonstrative lady, by the noise of her distress and the volume of her silks and laces, Mr. Stafford for once lost his cool head, staggered and turned pale. Rolling a wild eye round for explanation and help he met the Bishop's gaze fixed upon him with searching reprobation.

"A most painful scene!" said his lordship. "But, thank Providence, a crime has been timely averted—and the sweet confidence of so virtuous and trusting a lady as Mistress Bellairs has not been abused beyond repair."

"Crime—confidence!" ejaculated the bridegroom. "What in——?"

He made a struggle to relieve himself from the octopus-like embrace; but, owing to his reluctance to put forth his strength against a woman, only succeeded in producing a momentary relaxation followed by a yet more loving clasp. Denis felt that speech was imperatively demanded of the injured wife; but, aware that his first words must

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

inevitably betray him, he was forced to restrict himself to moaning endearments.

The *dénouement* could not have been delayed but for an unforeseen development. Mr. Stafford was not one likely to be long deserted by his wits; the colour had come back to his cheeks, and assurance to his voice, when next he spoke:

“Will someone kindly tell me who this person is supposed to be?”

The Bishop inflated his high nostril still higher with a scornful snort.

“If you deny your wife’s identity, sir —” he began, when Mr. Stafford interrupted him with a fierce laugh of dawning comprehension.

“My wife!” he cried. “Oho! Aha!” And with little of their previous forbearance, his hands laid hold of the muscular wrists that displayed such unfeminine strength. “Let me see what sort of face this wife of mine carries upon her remarkably fine figure!”

There was a scuffle, the struggle of two well-matched men. O’Hara’s one idea was to postpone the revealing vision of his countenance; and while resisting, therefore, with all his might, he kept boring his head into

❧ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❧

Stafford's chest, much to the detriment of the mourning bonnet.

"Mercy," exclaimed the Bishop, "he will kill her! Gentlemen, secure the ruffian — call the watch!"

But the Canon, heedless of the episcopal command, cried to the Dean in a fit of sporting enthusiasm:

"Gad, sir, I'll back the petticoats — she'll have him down to a certainty!"

It was at this juncture that Fate intervened.

So many strange things seemed to happen this morning that Mistress Kitty's wedding guests beheld with more amusement than surprise how, immediately after the mysterious removal of the bridegroom, a small, cloaked woman, who kept her face concealed, crept to the bride's side and began to whisper in her ear.

But after a brief colloquy, in which Mistress Bellairs had vouchsafed every token of indignation and astonishment, it was felt that matters had gone beyond a jest when she suddenly sprang to her feet, clutched the becloaked woman by the wrist and marched with her towards the vestry, a perfect tornado

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

of white lace, pearl-pink brocade and waving white plumes.

Miss Lydia now likewise emerged from the background and, with the audible cry : "What is this — my poor mistress? Oh! I must to her aid!" (which, having a taste for the drama, she contrived to deliver in the best style of the "devoted attendant,") rushed in the bride's wake.

Those who had staked their money on Stafford's chance began to look rueful, while there was proportionate triumph with those who had freely betted that there would again be no marriage of Kitty Bellairs.

The wrath of Mistress Bellairs (which was genuine) and her astonishment that there should be anyone else with a claim upon the man she had come forth herself to marry (which was well-feigned), merged into one overwhelming stupefaction when, bursting into the vestry, she discovered Mr. Stafford struggling in the embrace of yet another woman.

But little Madame Eglantine, who had made closer acquaintance with the shot silk and the brown mantua, instantly grasped the situation ; and on the spot she determined to

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

make the most of it for her own ends, well realising that, whatever the issue, her small personality must sink into safe insignificance.

"Ah, *ciel!*" she cried, quite as dramatically as Miss Lydia, "but this is not to believe one's eyes!"

She ran forward, flinging off her cloak.

"Let him go, madame, let him go!" she commanded shrilly, and herself laid hold of Stafford with clawing hands. "He is neither of yours nor of Madame Bellairs: he is mine by all the promises a man of honour can make!"

Assaulted from this unexpected quarter, Mr. Stafford loosened his grasp of O'Hara with such abruptness that the gentleman, unable to recover his balance and hampered by his petticoats, stumbled and fell face forward on the floor. Madame Eglantine profited by the opening to fling herself in her turn upon the bridegroom's bosom.

The Bishop, who, finding his orders unheeded, had been actually hesitating on the brink of personal interference, was now seized with the full tide of that choler which is not only constitutional with gentlemen of his rufous complexion, but which was here

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

imperatively demanded of the outraged dignity of the Church.

His red eyebrows arched above his haughty, protuberant eye. His tense muscles quivered as he stood looking from the trim little body clinging to Stafford's repellent arms to the ungainly figure stretched upon the floor. He cried in a voice of thunder:

"This is the most disgusting spectacle I — I ——" Words failed him. "Mr. Selwyn, my coach!"

As he turned, repudiating with a Jove-like sweep the now superfluous lawn, his eye fell upon Kitty.

"My dear lady," said he, "my dear child!" — and it was beautiful to see how the tenderness of the shepherd for his afflicted lamb struggled with his righteous anger against the prowling wolf. "I will not insult you by asking you if you still desire ——"

Mrs. Bellairs whisked round upon him with something of the movement of a kitten, dashing on one side the smelling salts which Lydia — very anxious to get her mistress out of the way before she should discover the identity of the aunt from Wales — was officiously offering. The bride's eyes literally shot sparks.

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

"I will not," pursued the Bishop, "insult you, by explaining to you that this marriage cannot now proceed. You have my fullest sympathy. May I offer you a seat in my carriage? You will thus avoid the further unpleasantness ——"

Kitty's cheeks were flaming under her rouge.

"Certainly not, my Lord Bishop!" she exclaimed. "I will have some explanation of this odious business first, and am surprised you should not also consider it your duty ——"

"My jurisdiction, madam," cried he, interrupting her in his turn with equal acerbity, "does not extend — I am thankful to say — over the conduct of all the profligates," here he flung a withering glance upon the unfortunate Stafford, who had but just succeeded in freeing himself from Madame Eglantine and was regarding her reproachfully, "nor of all the unfortunate females," here his lordship's eyes were averted in distaste from the still prostrate O'Hara who deemed that utter collapse was now his only resource, "who flock to this city of Bath. But," proceeded Dr. Thurlow, turning to the clerics and speaking in a tone that made

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

of the observation a command, "I leave it to Mr. Dean to see that the fullest investigation be carried through." And thereupon he moved to the door and was lost to sight.

"The fullest investigation!" sniffed Mistress Bellairs, no whit impressed. "I should think so indeed. Leave me alone, Lydia, I will *not* come away. Mr. Stafford, sir, I had heard rumours, but I refused to believe them. That person, I presume, is your Madame Clandestine — Eglantine — or whatever the name may be . . . it matters little to me. But who — who —? Oh, will one of you reverend gentlemen," said the bride, and even in her anger she did not forget her pretty smile, "have the goodness to turn over the creature on the floor?"

No sooner had these awful words fallen upon the ears of the prostrate Denis, than, gathering his limbs together, he sprang to his feet and made one wild leap for an exit. The bonnet, in which the late Mr. Bellairs had been mourned, fell upon one side, revealing a disordered red head. The brown silk mantua was dashed from broad shoulders.

"O'Hara, as I live!" cried Stafford. "I knew it!" And with a curse, the like of

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

which the Abbey walls could never have echoed before, he dashed in pursuit.

“Yoicks! Gone away!” cried the sporting Canon. And—quite demoralised by the unexpected course of events—he gathered up his robes and was for joining in the run, when the little Dean arrested him with such a scandalised hand and such a heartfelt cry of horror, that he returned to a sense of the proprieties and called fie upon the sacrilege and the disgrace as wrathfully as the Bishop himself might have done.

In the confusion Madame Eglantine discreetly vanished. Suffocating, Mrs. Bellairs fell upon a chair; but finding at least one offender ready to her vengeance, she gave up the idea of a swoon.

“So, *that* is your aunt from Wales?” she began, and it was balm to see the impregnable Lydia for once bite her nail and flounder in explanation, her consciousness of guilt in one direction preventing her from exculpating herself where she was really innocent. But the next instant the urgency of the situation made Mrs. Kitty realise that she must defer the congenial task of morally flaying the offending tire-woman to a more appropriate moment, and meanwhile gather

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

all her bright wits together to extricate herself with honour. She must be the first to laugh at what was ridiculous, and turn the discomfiture of the bride completely over to the bridegroom.

Promptly she sent the verger round to the church for Sir Jasper Standish, Colonel Villiers, my Lord Markham, Mr. Foulks and two or three other Bath notabilities, and was ready to receive them as they presented themselves—variously condoling, curious and important—in her gayest, most fascinating manner.

Very soon they left her again to join the rest of the guests. But so artfully pregnant had been the few sentences she had addressed to them that it was immediately made known to the eager congregation that not only were they still expected to the feast at Nassau House (which had been lent by the owner for this auspicious occasion), although no wedding would take place that morning—or, indeed, was ever likely to take place between Mr. Stafford and Mrs. Bellairs—but that Mistress Bellairs was in the highest spirits. And, in whispers, it passed like wildfire from mouth to ear, that, beyond doubt, the wily little widow herself

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

had not been altogether guiltless of the hitch which had thus disposed of Mr. Stafford's hopes.

"Tell them I expect their congratulations just the same," had said Kitty with her archest dimple.

It was a sight to make the gods smile to see Mr. O'Hara, followed by a hooting crowd, advance in kangaroo leaps down Orange Grove towards the shelter of Nassau House, tearing at bodice and skirt as he went, with such furious fingers that "cook's best paduasoy" and the kerchief and Kitty's little rolled-up stockings soon strewed the path of his flight. Mr. Stafford, in his unhindered swiftness, promptly caught him up.

"O'Hara, stop, you scoundrell!" panted he, now at white heat of passion, in the fugitive's ear.

O'Hara halted on the instant and wheeled round — a stranger spectacle than ever, with long legs emerging from Lydia's short quilted petticoat, with white-smeared face and feminine coiffure surmounting his own ruffled shirt. In one second his quick eye ascertained that Kitty was not in sight and he brought it then gaily back upon his

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

pursuer. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Mr. Stafford was shaken by anger. Choking, he flung out both arms with so menacing a gesture that O'Hara leaped aside with an answering glint in his own green gaze which spelt danger.

"Easy now!" cried he. "From a gentleman to a gentleman!"

"Gentleman!" echoed the other, with scathing emphasis.

"Well, I am a lady no longer, anyhow," said Denis, leaping out of the petticoat.

There was a shout of mirth from the fore-runners of the crowd that had begun to assemble about them.

"By your leave, friends . . . by your leave!" cried a husky voice. And a dingy-looking individual, breaking through the admiring circle at a hard trot, advanced upon O'Hara with outstretched hand. He was followed by a panting satellite.

"Thunder and Moses!" ejaculated Mr. O'Hara, and flung the petticoat with a dexterous movement over the head of the first sheriff's officer, while with a thrust of his now unhampered leg, he neatly tripped up the second. Then, calling over his shoulder: "We'll finish our conversation

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

in the house, Mr. Stafford," was off at full speed again.

With the assistance of a pair of borrowed swords, obligingly supplied by the major-domo (for Nash's draconian edict against the wearing of steel within the liberties of Bath was still in full force), Mr. O'Hara and Mr. Stafford "finished their conversation" in the further corner of Nassau House gardens. With so much promptitude indeed that, by the time the last group of guests had migrated from the Abbey to the panelled dining-room, Mr. O'Hara's arm had already been neatly bound up by Mr. Stafford himself, and the latter had seen his first fury of anger melt away with the running of his friend's hot blood.

Now, it might be that the little devils he had marked in Kitty's eyes during that ten minutes' purgatorial waiting in the Abbey had filled the bridegroom's soul with doubt. It might be—as some of his friends would have it—that Mr. Stafford's matrimonial intentions had hardly been more steadfast than Mistress Bellairs' own, and that he had been as discomfited as she herself to see matters drift so far (having proposed to her

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

merely because it was the genteel thing for a buck of Bath to be engaged to "incomparable Bellairs.") Or it might be, again, that there is no man who, when it comes to the point, does not feel the nuptial state as one suggestive of a noose and himself as something of a victim. At any rate there can be no doubt that when Beau Stafford presently sought the company it was with a front of unfeigned placidity, not to say satisfaction — a satisfaction no whit dimmed by finding Mistress Bellairs enthroned at the head of the table, more indisputably "Queen of Bath" than ever — not a man among her guests who did not hang upon her least smile, not a woman who did not fix her with eyes of envy.

He met the jocular greeting and the witty bantering, more or less pointed, more or less broad, of his friends with an unmovedly good-humoured eye; and, demanding the place which would have been his by rights, took seat at Kitty's left with a magnificent assurance.

The little lady, uncertain whether to keep up her first *rôle* of resentment towards him, or openly to display the sense of relief which was not only fairly well-founded but best

❖ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❖

calculated to save her dignity, was surprised into quite naturally gracious smiles.

Thus they sat together, bride that would never be wife of his, bridegroom that would never be her husband. The situation was quaint enough to please a woman who, above all things, was a foe to banality ; who, in the heart of her, could never resist a gentlemanly audacity, and who admired the courage of one capable of thus meeting such evil fortune.

Mr. O'Hara, in a pale blue wedding coat (provided *extempore* by the genial master of Nassau House), his right arm in a comfortable sling, hereupon rose from his seat and lifted his glass in his left hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, the mad joyousness of the moment leaping forth irrepressibly from eyes and lips, "let us, in all haste, drink the health of her who still, God bless her, remains Kitty Bellairs, to the hope of every bachelor heart among us! And (if there's a drop to spare) let us not forget our friend yonder on her left, who, if he's not the happy man he ought to be—I mean he might have been—But there's a crumb of comfort—a crumb of comfort I say, in every bitter draught——"

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

At this point the speaker who, between a complexity of emotions, the loss of some good blood and the gain of some generous wine, had not quite his usual mastery of eloquence, was not sorry to find his voice drowned in general laughter. Then, no sooner had the hubbub subsided a little, than the bridegroom reject himself, mimicking with some humour the consecrated manner of the brand-new husband on such occasions, claimed the attention of the table :

"Mr. O'Hara, sir," said he, "ladies and gentlemen, it is with a prodigious sense of gratitude that I rise to return thanks for myself, and for my wife that was to be but is not ——"

"Nor ever will be, amen!" put in the irrepressible O'Hara, and tilted another glass to his lips.

"For your very friendly acclamations," pursued Stafford unmoved. "Had that knot been tied to-day, which, ladies and gentlemen, as Mr. O'Hara so feelingly observes, would have made me the happy man that I am not, I might have hesitated to take so much upon myself as to venture to answer for her. For I have noticed, ladies, that an accomplished wife generally likes to

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT

“speak both for herself and her husband, which is a vastly proper state of affairs. Of course, dear friends, you are all fully aware that I stand before you a heart-broken man.”

The delicately ironic tone, the sweet, curling smile with which he pronounced these words, summoned back all the little devils to Kitty's eyes. Her vanity was beginning to smart. Was it possible, could it be possible, that he was not utterly heart-broken?

“Nevertheless,” resumed Mr. Stafford, after an effective pause, “as my valued friend has just remarked, ‘there is a crumb of comfort in every draught.’ I am not, as a rule, perhaps, fond of a crumb in my cup; but I cannot deny its consolatory presence to-day. Had I been made the happy man I hoped to be, why, I should now have nothing left to hope for.”

The clamour which had been gathering about him became uproarious. He waited resignedly till he could make himself heard again.

“As matters have fallen out,” he concluded, “I can still blissfully aspire with the best of you.”

He turned with his courtly bow, took

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

Kitty's little hand and raised it to kiss. Then he sat down smiling.

Kitty averted her head with crimsoning cheeks and lips fiercely held from trembling under proud little teeth.

Under cover of the general laughter, whispered he to her:

"And are you very angry with me, my pretty wife that is not to be?"

She looked at him for a second or two, hesitating: hating him for not being in greater despair, yet admiring him exceedingly.

"Confess," he went on in tender tones, "confess, Kitty, you have never liked me half so well?"

"And confess, sir," said she, flashing, "that you are vastly happier than if that ceremony had taken place."

Her mouth quivered, but the demons in her eyes suddenly vanished as if they had been put to flight by a pair of melting little cupids.

"Nay," said he, "but when you look at me so, I can regret nothing."

"I vow," she cried with apparent irrelevancy after a long pause, tossing her head, "I must settle poor dear O'Hara's debts:

❖ THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT ❖

't would be a thousand shames, after this, were he allowed to spend the night in the sponging house !”

“By your leave, madam,” interrupted Stafford quickly, “but I think I owe it to him to pay at least the half.”

He looked at the triumphant O'Hara with an unmistakable tenderness while she tossed her head and sipped at her beaker. Then they looked at each other and laughed. But Kitty's laughter quavered a little.





II.

“ I AM pale to-night ” — Mrs. Bellairs, the hare’s-foot poised in one plump, dimpled hand, bent forward to examine her pretty face in the mirror — “ A shade more on the left, eh, Lydia ? ”

“ Never a touch more, ma’am,” decided the maid, and from her mistress’s hand unceremoniously culled the little foot that had once padded so blithely over green turf.

“ I vow,” cried the lady, “ I’m looking a perfect fright ! ”

“ Well, ma’am,” began Lydia sardonically, “ I would not let that disturb me, since you are to go masked.”

Miss Lydia was in a less placid mood than usual, and she was not one who could suppress altogether a feeling of ill-temper.



There were fresh matrimonial projects floating in the air of which she disapproved. Her position as confidential maid to a rich and fascinating young widow was a source of so much profit as well as pleasure, so many discreet guineas as well as discreet kisses came her way in that capacity, that she had little desire to change these conditions, even for the sake of calling her mistress "My Lady Countess;" for such was the scheme that had come within the range of practical contemplation, since Mrs. Bellairs' return from Bath to her town residence in Mayfair.

"Why, girl," said Kitty Bellairs, baulked of the compliment she had the right to expect, "we unmask before supper. Surely any fool knows that!"

Lydia tossed her head and set out the patch-box with a bang.

Kitty sighed languorously, with a sudden change of mood, and flung a bird-like glance at Lydia's irate reflection in the psyche—a pretty mirror, this: garlanded with golden roses, held up by peeping cupids, meet, indeed, to receive so coquettish an image as that of "incomparable Bellairs," as the widow had been dubbed at Bath by one of its noted sparks.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"Ah! child," said the lady, "happy you, who will never know the troubles and anxieties with which a lonely woman has to meet in the great fashionable world!" Lydia sniffed. "I want a protector sadly, my good girl. (There's that quilted petticoat . . . and the square of Mechlin with the hole in it, where young my Lord Verney, oaf as he is, trod on my skirts in the Pump Room. 'Tis a beautiful bit of lace; you can have it for yourself. 'Twill make you very fine among the other tire-women.) Ah! 'tis a weighty decision. My heart is all of a flutter. . . . Give me a thimbleful of ratafia."

Miss Lydia poured out the desired restorative in the same disapproving silence.

"Take some yourself, child."

"No, thank you, ma'am." Ratafia had long ceased to be a treat to Lydia: familiarity breeds contempt. "It's apt to make the nose red, ma'am."

The lady put down her half-sipped glass, flung an anxious glance upon her pearly nose tip in the mirror, and then broke into justifiable rage:

"How dare you, miss? Go to the devil, you ungrateful, unpleasant girl!"

"La! ma'am, he would not have me as a

present; neither me nor you, for all he comes so often here."

"What in Heaven's name do you mean, Lydia?"

"It don't seem as if Heaven could ever have had anything to say to it, ma'am, one way or another."

"Gracious power, the creature will drive me mad! Who is it wants neither you or me? And what is it Heaven can have nothing to do with?"

"Why, the devil, ma'am, or the nearest approach to him that walks London this moment, meaning my Lord Mandeville. His heart's not really in it, nor ever will be. And if Heaven has anything to say to him, why, I am willing to——"

"Lydia!" cried Mistress Kitty, in a fury. Then she seized the first missile to her hand and flung it at the girl's head. Lydia dodged with the adroitness acquired by long habit; calmly picked up the silver curling tongs and began to ply them mechanically, as she surveyed her mistress with disapproving eyes.

Kitty had turned back to her mirror, and now set her small teeth in a smile of defiance.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"My Lord Mandeville not want Kitty Bellairs! We shall see!" The little fierce smile broadened into triumph. "We shall see!"

Presently the eyes swam back into the languor that had provoked Miss Lydia, and the widow pondered. Lydia broke the silence by observing in a detached manner: "There are several gentlemen sitting waiting in the blue room."

"Already!" Mistress Bellairs snatched at her jewelled watch and fell into a fresh flutter.

"Good Gracious, woman, do you know the time, and how long 't will take me to drive from Mayfair to Elm Park House with the roads a foot in mud? Come here, you gaby! Put the Paris knot on the left! . . . That curl's too long! The patches now—quick! Where is the box? Call yourself a tire-woman!"

The prettiest fingers in Bath—which some who passed as judges now swore were the prettiest fingers in London—groped for the silver and tortoiseshell box. One charming digit, with a black star on its tip, hovered tentatively round the dainty face. It was a critical moment: even Lydia held



her breath. But the little hand-fell back into the silken lap, its mission unaccomplished.

"Is Mr. Stafford among these gentlemen?" she asked suddenly, turning her eyes all weighted with anxiety, towards Lydia.

"Mr. Stafford, Mr. O'Hara, Sir George Payne — in scarlet, ma'am — and Mr. Mildmay — in sky-blue," responded the latter glibly.

There was quite a jingle as Lydia frisked round; four guineas at that moment were keeping snug company in her inner hanging pocket.

To the credit of these modish gentlemen (in whose number she felt safety) there was also printed in Lydia's memory tablets a very pretty compliment from Mr. Stafford, who had the art of neatly placing these assets, and a kiss or two from Mr. O'Hara (really, she had had to box his ears). As for the other two gentlemen they were obviously new to it. But one principle she had made clear to their inexperience, to wit that he who would sit in the lavender parlour (next to the young widow Bellairs' dressing-room door) must know how to pay for such privilege.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Tom Stafford!" ejaculated the widow. "He is positively the only man who knows how to pitch a patch. Admit him, instantly, instantly!" She drew her silken wrapper over the falling laces upon her bosom; then on further thought: "And Mr. O'Hara, too," she added, "the dear creature has taste."

"And Sir George?" queried Lydia, her hand on the door knob.

"Sir George! Did you not say the zany was in scarlet! I marvel at you, Lydia — and I in rose-pink!"

"Mr. Mildmay?"

"Let him languish!"

Lydia went forth with alacrity: — "Mrs. Bellairs will see Mr. Stafford and Mr. O'Hara, if they will be kind enough to step this way," said she with a cherry-mouth to the waiting clients. How demure was Lydia! "Yes, Sir George, I did inform my mistress of your presence — Yes, Mr. Mildmay, sir, I'll mention it again by-and-by. At least, if I get the chance. I'll do my best, Sir George. This way, please."

Mr. O'Hara and Mr. Stafford, faithful adorers, knew the way well enough. Kitty's pink-hung, becupided, becushioned sanctum

with its atmosphere of Parma-powder and flowers — the fragrance of a pretty woman's dainty vanities — was deliciously familiar to both. Mr. Stafford inhaled it like a connoisseur. O'Hara drew audibly a passionate breath of rapture.

"Glory be to God, Kitty," he cried, "but it's the beauty of the summer dawn you've got this winter night!"

He seized his beloved's right hand, and there could be no mistake about the fact that he saluted it.

"A rose!" exclaimed Stafford, advancing with short, dainty steps to bow over the lady's left wrist, negligently extended in his direction, and touch it with a butterfly kiss. "A rose? — a hundred roses, a heaven of roses!"

Kitty shifted velvet eyes for a second from the contemplation of her image in the mirror to that of her handsome swains as they appeared over her shoulders. A little shiver of pleasure passed over her person as she dropped her glance back to her own reflection. She coquetted with it for a second or two, drawing up a pretty throat, tilting an impudent chin, sweeping long black lashes downwards to peep through them as she

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

slowly moved her head from one side to the other.

"Oho, Tom, my boy!" cried O'Hara, "and when did you ever see a rose with such a pair of eyes?"

"And when did a cold, empty sky wear such a smile?" retorted Stafford in a light tone that contrasted with the Irishman's fervour.

"Come, come!" cried Kitty briskly; "do you think I have time to-night for this sort of thing? You've been admitted on business, my friends. Now, Stafford, what say you" — lifting up the patch again — "shall it be under the left eye? O'Hara, keep quiet, or out you must go!"

Mr. Stafford sat down on a gilt-leg stool and worked it forward very respectfully to as close proximity as circumstances would allow; then, folding his arms, he threw a deep air of gravity into his looks as he contemplated the visage which the widow turned with equal seriousness for his inspection.

There was a moment of throbbing silence, while O'Hara gnashed his teeth. Presently the oracle delivered itself.

"Such eyes as yours, dear Kitty," he said in his soft, well-bred voice, "need no finger-



post to draw attention to them. They are beacons that claim instant admiration by their own flame." ("Ah, now! listen to him! Talk of my metaphors!" muttered O'Hara.) "But the dimple that comes with your heavenly smile and goes with your — your gentle melancholy ——" (Lydia sniffed) — "that dimple, Kitty, which peeps and vanishes like a star in our night, it would not be amiss to make the world mindful of it. As who should look and read: *ad astra!*"

Kitty turned eagerly back to the glass. "Perhaps you are right," said she.

Stafford half rose from his seat.

"Stay, too low! — too high! Oh, Kitty, have a care — nay, this frown will never do; I must see a smile, or I cannot guide. Stop, stop!" He laid his hand over hers.

A sudden vision in the glass of O'Hara's countenance behind her, lowering under his powdered red hair — and the desired smile flashed on the lady's lips.

"Now!" cried Stafford:

He shot out a long finger, and gently but firmly pressed its tip just by the side of the dimple. When he withdrew it, Kitty smiled again.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"A stroke of genius," said she.

And Stafford, stepping back and contemplating her with his head on one side, assented in satisfied tones: "I have been heaven-inspired."

Mr. O'Hara's comment, which placed Mr. Stafford's proper habitation in quite another region and further expressed a desire to hasten his home-going, passed unheeded by the two consultants.

"Now for the domino!" cried Mistress Bellairs gaily, preparing to rise.

"Nay, nay!" exclaimed Stafford, arresting her. "Two are the mode of the Town, this year, Kitty."

"Two, the mode?" echoed she.

"Aye, surely. One patch on the face, dearest Bellairs, and one on the throat — for whomsoever has a handsome shoulder. It has been the rage ever since Miss Rachel Peace, of Sadler's Wells, appeared last month in the 'Stratagem,' and Lord Mandeville swore out loud, in my Lady Trefusis's box, that she had the fairest shoulders ——"

Kitty started as if the words had covered a little stab. Miss Lydia turned round with an interested air.

"And has this Rachel Peace, in your



opinion, my good man, anything so wonderful about her? A pasty baggage, I thought her—and thin in the collar-bone. . . . Where did she wear that patch?”

“Oh, Kitty,” said Stafford, with his pleasant laugh, “ask me not about Rachel Peace, for I vow, whatever I have seen of other women, I forget to-night. I could not tell you the exact spot where Miss Rachel Peace wore the patch; but, methinks, I could decide where it best would become Mistress Kitty, so that he who saw it will carry the memory of it to his grave.”

“Well, be quick!” snapped she.

He pushed back his chair a pace or two, and surveyed her critically.

The unwonted excitement which possessed Mrs. Bellairs, that usually self-satisfied little lady, this evening, had brought fresh sparkles to her eye and a flush to her cheek that shamed its rouge. Beneath the folded laces, the fair bosom was heaving with shortened breath.

It may be that Mr. Stafford prolonged his contemplation a few seconds longer than was required. It was a talent of this mercurial gentleman to seem most respectful where he was most audacious: so that things were per-

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

mitted to him with smiles that might have been denied with frowns. He delivered judgment:

"Here, where runs that little vein, azure rivulet through a fair field of snow — where the lovely shoulder falls into this little valley, planned by Cupid himself under Venus' own eyes — where ——"

"That will serve, sir," said Kitty, whisking round and, with the unerring swoop of genius, planting a dainty black star in the faint curve of the white shoulder thus poetically indicated. Then she turned again to flash her triumph at Stafford.

He clapped his hands, half with that mockery that never left him, half in genuine admiration:

"Perfect! the last touch! Ah, 't is rightly named: *L'assassine!*"

"*L'assassine!*" She caught the word with a happy laugh, and then, her eye once again on her mirror, regarded the effect of the patch musingly.

"Why, madam," said Stafford, with a sudden dry gravity, "and pray what fresh assassination are you plotting for to-night?"

Mr. O'Hara had been no unmoved witness of these delicate proceedings. Only a ripe



experience of her temper, when interfered with, had prevented him a score of times from flinging himself between his privileged rival and the complacent lady. His dumb show of fury, the clenched hand thrust out and withdrawn, the mute apostrophising of Kitty, the mute cursing of his friend, had, however, somewhat relieved his overcharged feelings while affording much amusement to Lydia. Now, however, he deemed the time come to recall his personality to the widow's fickle mind.

"By me soul," he cried, running forward and flinging himself on his knees, "if it's assassination she wants, I'm ready for her. Sure she's done me to death a thousand times, but here's a heart that will be ready to die again as often as she pleases."

Kitty cast a glance of good-humoured scorn on the gay, reckless face upturned to the light. In spite of its gaiety and recklessness, there was passion in the red-brown eye, a mad passion which gratified her—little as she now thought of gratifying it. Her glance shifted quickly back to Stafford's countenance.

"I cannot say," this gentleman was stating, "like our volatile friend, that I am ready

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

to die more than once. But, as Mistress Bellairs has the keeping of my heart, she knows that it is hers to break once and for ever, should she so please."

Looking on him, Kitty considered. Was that cold grey gaze of his capable of one spark of real emotion? Should she ever bring this slippery, polished courtier in true earnest to her feet?

It certainly was to her credit that Kitty's discarded bridegrooms should immediately have resumed their posts as adorers, without loss, it seemed, of faith, hope or charity in their capricious goddess. But with a return to London life, Kitty's horizons and ambitions had been widening. She nibbled her little finger pensively, then flung out both her hands.

"And are ye men of sport, and would you have me strike again what's dead already, O'Hara? — or slay what's tame, Stafford? Oh, fie!"

"Denis, my lad, up with you!" cried Stafford with his jovial laugh, striking the kneeling O'Hara on the shoulder. "Our Kitty has higher game for her pretty bow and arrow than out-of-pocket you or humble untitled me."

The dimple peeped in Kitty's cheek ; she kicked off a tiny Spanish slipper.

"My shoes, Lydia," she commanded, unconcerned.

The Honourable Denis made a wild plunge on all fours to snatch the dainty objects from Lydia's hands and have the placing of them upon the little foot in its pink silk stocking, of which he had had a brief, entrancing vision. But Mistress Bellairs thwarted him by a dexterous movement. And as she rose, duly shod, clapping her heels with a conquering air, O'Hara, still squatting on the floor, fell back upon the consolation of rapturously kissing a discarded slipper.

Over a dress of tiffany embroidered with roses, of a splendour that baffled description, the lady now slipped on a dream of a domino, all rosy satin and fragrant lace ; and while Lydia spread out the great hood before delicately drawing it over the high-massed powdered curls, Mistress Bellairs was fain to shoot another glance of sweet vanity at Mr. Stafford — just to read in his eyes how entrancing she looked.

But he shook his head at her. "I am sorry for you, my dear!"

"What is the meaning of that, sir?"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Only, my dearest life, to see so fair a huntress bent on so bootless a chase!"

Here Lydia's sniff was fraught with so much meaning that, in a double fury, Mistress Kitty wrenched herself loose from her woman's hands and stamped her foot at Mr. Stafford.

"You are monstrous impertinent, sir — and, besides, monstrous ignorant of what you are talking about!"

"Madam, his lordship is still the willing prize of another bow . . . Kitty, Kitty, you will point your little arrows in vain, for once."

The more serious turn the conversation had taken had arrested Mr. O'Hara's attention. He dropped the slipper he had been melodramatically apostrophising and began to listen with a serious countenance.

"I'll have you know, dear Kitty," pursued Mr. Stafford in his gentle tone, "that this same Mandeville is bound hand and foot, heart and purse, to one Rachel Peace — whilom Quaker, now fair renegade and actress at Sadler's Wells, and a pretty piece likewise — pardon the quip! He's mad in love. Mad jealous too. He'll beat a man if he applaud her not enough, and he'll beat a



man if he applauded her too well — Egad, I believe, did she but know how to play her cards, she'd be his countess yet!"

Kitty gave a start — her face contracted by a spasm of fury. But, quickly restraining herself, she shrugged her shoulders with a smile as of one who disdains to argue, picked up her mask from the table and feigned a mighty interest in the glow of her eyes behind it in the glass.

Lydia, who had listened with malicious approval to Mr. Stafford's discourse, received his last remark with a cough and an involuntary shake of the head. "Lud, but these fine gentlemen be fools!" she thought. "He wants to put my mistress off, and sets her on with as good as tally-ho!"

But Mr. Stafford went on. He was, perhaps, not such a fool as the worldly-wise Lydia believed; he perhaps found pleasure of a sort in this delicate baiting of one who had baited him so long.

"And, sweet Kitty, I'll have you know that when a man is as far gone in love as this same Mandeville, any other woman, be she as fair as Venus, is no more to him than the veriest hag."

There are limits to the endurance even of

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

a pretty woman's pride. That Kitty Bellairs should live to be told, by a man, that, by any possibility, she —

“And I'll have you know, sir — you who think yourself so well posted in the news of the Town — that my Lord Mandeville and Mistress Peace have not been on speaking terms these ten days, and that his lordship has been courting me steadily these six. I'll have you know, sir, that his lordship is in sad need of fortune, in sad need of settled life; in fine, sir, of such a wife as your humble servant; and that this masked ball, which you are pleased to-night to grace with your company, is given, sir, by his lordship's sister, Lady Flo, in honour of Mistress Bellairs,” — the lady's flowery silks and satins billowed round her as she swept an annihilating curtsey — “and I'll have you know, sir, that this same masque, in my honour, is to no other end than that his lordship may finally conclude matters with a lady of his own world, worthier of his attentions than this play-actress. My Lord Mandeville commissioned his sister to find him beauty, and money, and wit, sir. I leave it to you to say if she has succeeded.”

“'Pon my soul!” interrupted the Irish



gentleman, with sudden explosion. "He'll be content with no less! It's the devil's own impudence he's got! A carrot-headed, empty-pursed rake of a fellow, with the temper of old Nick, if all accounts be true!"

"If you say another word, O'Hara," said Kitty summarily, over her shoulder, "Lydia will show you the door." Silence fell on the instant, and Kitty flounced her triumph upon the real offender. "So, sir," she resumed, "you see."

"Beauty, money — and wit," repeated he, in a kind of muse.

"Yes, Mr. Stafford," affirmed Kitty, with a smile and a wriggle; "and my Lady Flora could think of no one better."

"Indeed," said he, "I am not surprised." His voice and look were so silky-soft that Mistress Bellairs deemed him completely vanquished and, womanlike, proceeded to roll the prostrate foe in the dust.

"And so, my good friend, you need no longer fear for me a bootless chase, for the quarry is to my hand to lay low, if I please. And I myself have chosen the form of entertainment for to-night, for it is my pleasure to give his lordship further proof of my wit behind the mask before permitting him to

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

claim as his own — well, what you think, sir, will seem no better to him than that of the veriest hag."

Now Mr. Stafford sighed and Mistress Kitty broke off. There was something disconcerting about his air. She looked sharp inquiry at him.

"Let us go, my dearest madam," he said in a melancholy tone.

"You'll drive me mad," said she.

"What is it now? My coach has been waiting this hour to escort yours." Again she stamped her foot. "You have my most earnest wishes," said he, turning up his eyes and sighing once more.

"Mr. Stafford," she stormed, "I'll have your meaning, for this is more than I can endure."

"My Lord Mandeville will be waiting in vain for beauty, wit, and money." She caught him by the wrist and shook him. Then he fixed his eyes upon her for the first time that evening bereft of their dancing mockery. "Kitty," said he, "you left one thing out of your calculations."

"And pray what may that be?"

"You've never really known anything of it yet, though I vow you've seen it oft



enough; and 'tis something, my dear, that, when once you know it, you'll let all the world go by, just for the sake of it. Lord Mandeville knows it, and that is why, for all your wit and all your beauty and all your money, you'll not meet your match in him."

Kitty drew back, her lips curling in scorn.

"And this marvellous something?"

"'T is but Love, my dear lady."

She had known what he was going to say. And yet it enraged her when he had said it. And so did the groan with which O'Hara echoed the word.

"My pelisse, Lydia!" she cried sharply. "My fan, girl. I verily believe I shall turn lunatic myself, if I listen to these lunatics a moment longer. Call up the footmen!"

Yet, as Mr. Stafford was, *facile princeps*, one of the finest beaux in town, she was fain to accept his hand as far as the coach; were it only for the effect upon the gentlemen hopelessly waiting in the ante-room.

Mr. O'Hara caught the maid by the arm as she would have followed her mistress.

"By heaven, this is bad news for me! And since when, Lydia, has your divine mistress fixed her heart upon that devil?"

"Her heart!" sneered Lydia, and tossed

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

her head, she being of Mr. Stafford's opinion on the matter.

"Lydia, me darling, if that Mandeville comes here after her, think of me and poison his tea for him, and I'll give you the finest diamond necklace in the world — if I have to go to the road for it."

He was desperately in earnest. There were beads of anguish on his brow and a grey pallor upon his gallant comeliness. Yet, as he slid his arm imploringly round the girl's waist, and felt how slim and trim it was, he could not help giving it a tender squeeze, for its own sake.

"Get along with you!" cried Lydia, with a vigorous push, which landed him on the other side of the door.

Left alone, she stood in deep reflection. Then she shook herself, and began folding and putting away her mistress's garments with sharp movements which betrayed much inner irritation. All at once she paused.

A large pictorial card of invitation, elegantly engraved by Mr. Bartolozzi, requesting Mrs. Bellairs' presence at Lady Flora Dare-Stamer's mansion at Elm Park that evening, caught her attention.

"La! she's forgotten the ticket."



As she spoke the word, half aloud, a sudden gleam leapt into her eye, succeeded by a slow, malicious smile.

Lydia nodded her head, as if in answer to some inner suggestion; and, slipping the card into the bosom of her gown and, snatching a cloak, straightway left the house.

“Though your lordship does not dance, I trust he sups,” said the little pink domino.

Lord Mandeville, lying back so languidly on the settee that his head reposed on the back of it and his legs stretched to quite insolent length before him, turned a lazy eye upon the small rosy mask who sat very upright by his side.

These two had drawn apart into a deserted boudoir and, through wide-open double doors, looked forth on the brilliant throng, ever shifting with ever changing effect in the great ball-room beyond. Out there, all was noise with music and high voices and laughter, all was movement, white light and flashing colour. Here within, there was a padded stillness, an artful pink-wax dimness—a small silence, just for two.

Lord Mandeville yawned without taking

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

the trouble to raise the large white hand that lay inert upon his knees. ("Not even O'Hara," thought Mistress Kitty, "has better teeth; not even Stafford has a better leg!") And that languid eye of his roamed from the tip of a pink shoe artfully peeping, to where the parting folds of the pink domino first betrayed an entrancing vision of the fall of an exquisite waistline and next the rise of a still more exquisite bosom, a pearly peep of which was triumphantly ridden by a tiny black star.

Resting his gaze at leisure on the round, saucy chin, just clear of the hanging lace of the mask, his lordship drawled at length:

"I don't mind supping, if you sit beside me, rosy unknown."

Here he lifted one of his inert hands with so indifferent a gesture that Kitty was quite surprised to find it, next, clasping her waist — and pretty tightly too. Her heart gave a leap. Did he guess . . . ? Bah! Men were all alike! Disengaging herself, she remarked with sudden asperity:

"Keep yourself under control, my lord, or we shall quarrel."

He raised his sandy eyebrows a fraction higher than nature had already drawn them,



and slipped the rebuked hand contentedly into the pocket of his embroidered waistcoat.

"I quarrel? 'Tis vastly too much trouble. I'm the most peaceable man alive."

"Oh, all the world knows," cried the pink domino—and through her mask her black eyes stabbed him like fine stilettos—"that your lordship is notoriously a lover of peace."

For a second, between his drooping lids, there shot at her, as it were, the gleam of a blade, before which her own small weapons were but toys. Half way up the pallor of his cheek there crept a hesitating, sullen flush, but the next instant light and glow had faded again, and his countenance was once more that empty mask of manhood which so few had ever seen animated. His waistcoat shook over a faint chuckle which found no expression on his lips.

"When I find something better than peace, I may love it dearer."

"Oh, vastly well!" cried Kitty with an angry titter—not so easy to manage, this man, after all; he must be stirred from his contemptuous ease, at any cost!—"And sure none of your lordship's well-wishers would object, I'm told, were it only . . . peace and honour!"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Lord Mandeville shifted himself in his seat, so as to bring his full indifferent eye straight upon the mask.

"Honour is a monstrous big word on little lips," said he, without this time betraying the smallest emotion. "But most of you fine ladies, I vow, know not even how to spell it."

"Alas, my lord," cried the pink domino sharply, "if all one hears be true how many have you taught to spell — its opposite?"

Lord Mandeville took his hand out of his pocket and slapped it on his knee.

"My dear," said he, "if you'll take off that mask, I'll make your pretty lips spell some nice little words of one syllable that, I trow, will not be new to them!"

Mistress Bellairs looked at him a moment in deep reflection before answering. Here, beside her, was the most notorious *roué* in the kingdom; he who, if rumour spoke truly could make what he liked of half the fine ladies in London, and disdained the trouble. Why had she also set her heart on him? What was there, then, about him? He was in difficulties, through his own recklessness; he was of no higher family than a dozen others, and vastly less handsome than some. His eyes were too prominent under too



arched brows; his face too pale, his hair too sandy. Pride, pride, disdain, *ennui*, sat on his languid eyelid; on his full underlip, on his thrust-out cleft chin. What, then, was there about him? Something there must have been, in sooth, for Kitty swore by all her little gods that she would bring him to her feet.

"Pray, my lord, how do they spell manners in your school?" she asked.

"Much as they spell fiddle-de-dee in yours, my dear. Tut! off with your vizard, pink butterfly, and to our bargain!"

"Nay, sir; I'll have you know it takes two to make a bargain."

"In faith and I hope — else it would be dull work. You are elementary, madam. Why, 't is one of the first examples in grammar one learns to decline."

"Oh, to decline," quoth she pointedly. "I'll need no teaching to do that here, my lord!"

He again turned towards her. Tiny flecks of light were dancing in the eyes he fixed upon her. Kitty saw that she had begun not only to amuse but to tantalise. Her heart swelled with anticipation of triumph.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Not only the easy kiss to be withheld until it was asked for in other fashion than this, but the sight of that little face of hers, which Kitty herself believed was the most fascinating in all the town, to be denied until that ripe moment when it should shine forth before the assembled beauties of the great supper table and be acclaimed beyond compare; that of his bride!

A grey domino, dove-grey from head to foot, tall and of very slight figure (so much only the close-falling folds allowed the eye to apprise), had been leaning against the archway, looking in upon them. Now she glided across the room and, to Kitty's extreme displeasure, sat down upon the other side of Lord Mandeville. The latter, however, did not seem to prize the *tête-à-tête* so highly: he glanced round with a smile.

"A grey moth," said he, "and a pink butterfly. Well, ladies, I have a large heart."

The grey domino sighed faintly, but with an echo as of great sadness.

"Grey is a fair colour," said Lord Mandeville, suddenly and irrelevantly addressing his own diamond-buckled shoe. "A man

can live with greys where your reds will sicken him in an hour."

His face softened, as he spoke, in an almost incredible manner, and his eye lost itself as if in the contemplation of a tender vision. Kitty knew that he was thinking of his play-actress, and cursed the fine London lady—surely a fine London lady, if a guest at Elm Park this night!—whose freak for a Quakerish colour had put her own rosy brilliance at discount.

The grey domino sighed again.

"Grey is the colour of fading light," said she. She spoke in a voice obviously feigned, but even then it was a soft one. "I ask myself what it is doing here."

"It's resting my eyes," said his lordship abruptly.

"Verily, a strange place for you too, sir, if rest be what you are seeking."

Kitty's pulses began to beat very quickly. She had pricked her ear at the sound of the "verily."

"May be that your lordship," said she, addressing him, but answering his mysterious neighbour, "will find more truth in light and colour after all than in these demure greys. What is grey but tarnished white?"

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Grey Domino gave a little start and something like the ghost of a cry.

Lord Mandeville rolled his eyes from the pink to the grey. Then he put his own hand suddenly on the slender, grey-gloved hand that was peeping out of the great muffling sleeve, and turned his back upon Mistress Kitty.

"I came here to try and forget."

Kitty could hardly believe that this was the hard, mocking voice she was familiar with.

"And can you forget?"

"Aha!" thought the little, angry listener, "Grey Domino omits to disguise her tones."

She could not distinguish his next words, which were whispered into the new-comer's ear. But the answer to them, though low spoken, with a little break as between tears and smiles, Kitty caught with a fierce pounce as she lay in wait like a cat for a mouse.

Said Grey Domino:

"Ah, my lord, ah, Lionel, thee knows!"

What Lord Mandeville knew Kitty did not pause to ask, but she herself knew enough. She sprang to her feet.

"Peace be with thee, friend Mandeville," she cried with an angry titter, pausing a second to have the satisfaction of seeing the



grey domino again start and wince—to have the humiliation of meeting the careless momentary glance that Lord Mandeville threw at her before dismissing her existence from his mind.

Then she hurried forth, fluttering her feathers in a vast state of fume and virtuous indignation, not unmingled with scorn for the worthlessness of the object. It was monstrous, it was not to be borne, that honest women should be brought in contact with such creatures!—To push her audacity into pursuing him into his own sister's house—the hussy! A Quaker, a renegade at that—a fool into the bargain—"Thee knows!"—and to call herself an actress! Kitty paused to consider for a moment, with artistic regret, how she would have treated the situation. Then she pursued her angry hunt for her hostess: such things were not to be permitted to pass unpunished. The quality must be protected; insolence must be exposed!

She discovered Lady Flora easily enough; no domino could disguise those rotund proportions; nor could the jolly fat laugh be kept by mask or hood within bounds of secrecy.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Kitty swiftly drew her aside and poured forth her tale. At the news of so dangerous a presence in her house and the consequent failure of their plans, the anger of Lord Mandeville's sister was for the moment quite satisfactory.

"Tut—tut! A pretty story! How dare the trollop!—la! dear, how you do pinch—Quite so. I agree with you, but you need not shake me, child, I'm not going to stand it. But what is to do?"

Kitty had her plan. It had sprung, like Minerva, ready armed from her excited brain. Lady Flora listened with but half attention—the supper room was about to be thrown open, the music had already ceased. The best part of the entertainment, from her point of view, was about to begin. After a second she chuckled: Kitty's idea seemed to promise sport.

"Capital," she cried, "capital! I leave it all to you." Her mind flew off again to fat capon and Sillery. "But be brief. We are actually keeping His Royal Highness waiting!"

The authorisation was all that Kitty Bellaïrs demanded. She was only anxious to be given a free hand. For a second she stood



in a corner of the ball-room, as if in reflection, watching the scene as each silken beau sought his favourite mask, and partners interchanged or clung together, in anticipation of the procession to supper. But all the while she never lost sight of the little pink alcove room, as the cat watches the mouse-hole. She knew that there was no other exit from it and that her prey could not escape.

"Supper, supper!" cried Lady Flo jovially, her fat, mittened hand resting on the boyish arm of the royal guest.

"May I have the delight?" said Mr. Stafford in Kitty's ear. "I've been seeking you all the evening."

To his surprise she accepted with alacrity, and thereupon advanced with him into the room towards the pompous figure of that elderly and renowned buck, Mr. Colthurst of Glares, who was playing his usual *rôle* of master of ceremonies. At the same instant the tall figures of Grey Domino and her cavalier appeared in the archway.

Kitty's hour had struck.

"Pray, sir," said she to Mr. Colthurst, "have you not forgot your duties? Is it, not to be: 'masks off?'"

He rolled a dubious and prominent eye.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"I thought at the supper table," said he.

"Pooh!" cried Kitty, with a scornful titter behind her vizard. "*C'est là une mode bien passée, cher monsieur!* Have you not heard that where Royalty is to sup not one sits down in disguise?"

Stafford stared in amaze at Rose Domino. What was the new scheme? Mr. Colthurst, on his side, hesitated. But his glance appraised the film of priceless lace, the flash of the great ruby at her throat; while his ear seized the assurance of her tone, the purity of her French accent. Here was some very great lady—and there was a new rule, and he had not known it! He flushed purple.

"Masks off!" he exclaimed in commanding tones, clapping his hands. "Every lady must this moment unmask!"

Grey Domino, half way across the room, halted as if the words had hit her. Lord Mandeville, with a whispered encouragement, was for drawing her onwards. Mr. Colthurst at this moment uplifted his hand; a respectful circle was formed round the door, into the midst of which stepped the young Prince and stood smiling down the long saloon. Lady Flora's rubicund visage, already unveiled, shone beside him; and the royal



guest nodded with boyish pleasure and curiosity as, one after the other, the vizards fell, the dominoes were discarded, and many a fair, merry countenance was revealed under the wax-lights.

Kitty had been among the first to obey the mandate she had herself inspired — the better to breathe her triumph. She had succeeded — the Quaker was trapped! She could almost hear how Lord Mandeville whispered in the ear of his frightened partner: "Leave it to me. I will manage."

"Shall you, my lord, shall you?" cried the little widow vindictively to herself. And, drawing Stafford swiftly with her, she took up her post within easy distance of the seat to which Lord Mandeville had retreated, in the evident hope of remaining unnoticed in the crowd. It was then that Stafford began to guess something of Kitty's manœuvre. He recognised the "noble quarry," and saw beside him the dove-grey mask, with whom his lordship seemed indeed much occupied.

"Oho! Sits the wind in that quarter? Has some new thing of wit, of wealth, and of beauty stolen a march upon our delicious Kitty? Why, then, as poor O'Hara is so fond of saying, will there be wigs on the green!"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Little, however, did the genial gentleman realise, what wigs!

Kitty looked eagerly round the room. Thus far, so many fair ones still preferred the delicate joys of dalliance, so many lingered to whisper a last audacious or coquettish word under safe cover, that Grey Domino could evoke no comment.

Mistress Bellaïrs raised a shrill protest. She felt herself the ineptitude of it. A few turned in surprise, a few in admiration, to glance at the little face, which, quivering with passion, had never looked more brilliantly pretty. But the young Bath widow was scarcely known yet in Town. And here a fading duchess shrugged her shoulder; there a beau raised his glass to appraise *en connoisseur*. No more did she avail. Still unnoticed, Grey Domino sat in safety, and Lord Mandeville was whispering unpunished in her ear. Quick as lightning, Kitty turned to Stafford:

"Up with you!" she bade him, in a fierce undertone. "It is the right of you men to claim, 'Masks off!'"

He looked at her with a sort of benevolent amusement as she trembled beside him; then, whether to please her, whether from a curios-

ity to see the end of the comedy, prepared to humour her.

Beau Stafford was a power in the narrow world of fashion. The mere fact of his advance into the room secured silence.

"Fie! Fie!" he cried. "Why will our fair ones be so fair, yet so unfair? . . . Gentlemen, insist upon your rights — your hour has come! Off with those ugly barriers behind which we have been baited and mocked all night! —"

He was interrupted by bursts of laughter. Masculine hands were outstretched, little white ones repelled them. It was a pretty uproar. His Royal Highness was vastly entertained. Emboldened, Mr. Stafford raised his voice higher:

"Nay, then — he that fails to get the vision of his lady's face, let him pass as a discarded knight! And the fair one who still denies — why, faith, let her pass as one who had better hide!"

He laughed out loud himself, the genial beau, as he ran a swift eye over the length of the room. That last neat thrust of his had reached home! Not a lady but had swiftly whipped off the offending vizard. He was retiring, well satisfied, to Kitty's side, when

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

his arm was nipped between little fingers of steel.

"Look to your right!" ordered Mrs. Bellairs.

And truly, there sat Grey Domino, still masked. Beside her, aroused for once in his life, with countenance changing from livid pallor to crimson — Lord Mandeville, with furious eyes, challenging.

These were days when if a gentleman did not hold blood cheap he were not worthy the blood of a gentleman. It was these challenging eyes that Mr. Stafford hastened to answer now, rather than Kitty's implied command.

"So, ho, my lord, do you plead guilty — or does your partner?"

There was a flutter that cleared the space around him. Kitty negligently flirted her fan. Things were on the move at last.

"And if it pleases me that my partner should remain masked, what then, Mr. Stafford?"

"Why then, your lordship has doubtless good reasons. But 't is not for me to give the verdict, since his lordship has a right to be judged by his peers."

So saying, he drew back. But matters



were indeed moving, as Kitty had pronounced. Curiosity was aroused. Aye, and jealousy. The men were now all agog about the mysterious stranger; the ladies were dying to know who could have made so swift a conquest where most had tried and failed. The Prince was observed to question Lady Flora; and the latter began to display some flurry. She was anxious, indeed, as Kitty noted with much wrath, to lead him forthwith to the supper room. But, his curiosity being piqued, he pleasantly but firmly resisted.

There was clamour and counter-clamour. Grey Domino sat very still; Lord Mandeville, crouching a little forward, looked from one to the other, not unlike a wild beast selecting his prey. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and touched the hilt of his sword, snarling against the laughing cries, "Unmask! unmask!"

"And I say she shall not!"

There fell a dead silence. This sudden turn towards tragedy was unexpected; not at all in good taste. Lady Flora looked extremely annoyed, while, with the exquisite tact that always characterised him, His Royal Highness pointedly drew attention to

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

the charming design of her Venetian chandeliers.

The poor hostess laid her hand on his arm and again murmured, "Supper;" but he, with an airy gesture of admiration towards the ceiling (painted by Thornhill), contrived to advance quite a couple of yards nearer the interesting group.

As Lord Mandeville had touched his sword he had looked again darkly at Mr. Stafford, and Mr. Stafford had instantly taken one step forward and repeated the gesture with cheerful alacrity. It was as discreet as an interchange of masonic amenities. But behind her mask Grey Domino's eyes shifted from one to the other.

"Come," said Lord Mandeville then, with sudden decision, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

Grey Domino rose, but it was not to obey. For the first time in the scene in which she was so deeply interested, she lifted her voice; a low, soft voice it was, yet heard all through the room.

"Nay," said she, "God forbid that hand should touch sword because of my folly. I will even uncover my face."

Lord Mandeville started with a gesture of



angry protest. Then, with a swift change of mood:

"Do so, then!" he cried loudly, and sent his eyes roaming in defiance round the expectant circle, to end at last upon his sister's heated countenance. Yet now the defiance of those arrogant eyes of his was almost joyous, almost that of triumph.

Under hands that trembled a little, Grey Domino's mask fell, and the face of Rachel Peace was revealed to the assembly.

There was a sudden indrawing of breath; a rustle and creak of silk as if upon a gasp of surprise; then a deep silence in which the very walls seemed to take eyes; and then a low quick murmur.

The countenance of Rachel Peace, among all these flushed and rouged faces, looked strangely pale. As those who knew her remembered, her head usually drooped a little from a long slender neck; but now, held high, it took a poise of pride. Hers was the countenance of one who thought, of one who suffered. There were many more beautiful present, there were some of the noblest in the land; but beside this poor actress in her hour of humiliation, how inane, how vapid did they show: the Fine Ladies

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

beside the Woman! Rachel Peace moved slow eyes from one to another, and there was not a man that moment that did not envy Lord Mandeville. There was also not a dame but would have cheerfully signed the girl's death-warrant, save, perhaps Lady Flora, whose good-natured soul was chiefly concerned at such a to-do in her house, at such an interruption to good appetite. But, with the Prince's now grave presence by her side, and goaded as she was by looks, shrugs, whispers, she felt forced to take action. She could be a very great lady when she chose.

"Pray, madam," said she, advancing in dignity, "to what do I owe the honour?"

The slow eyes turned to her. Then Rachel Peace spoke again:

"Alas, madam," she answered with simplicity, "there is no excuse that I can offer for my intrusion. I can only beg your ladyship to allow me to withdraw."

She moved forward and curtsied to the Prince with the inimitable grace and measure of one to whom the art of movement has become second nature. And on the same instant an unexpected utterance pronounced the verdict of the evening:

"I feel sure," said the young Prince, "that

wherever Miss Rachel Peace appears, she may reckon upon a welcome."

Thereupon he clapped his hands twice, lightly, as if applauding her from the royal box in her own playhouse; on the instant every gentleman in the company followed the august example. And Rachel Peace made her exit to the familiar sound of acclamations.

At the door she looked back over her shoulder and found Lord Mandeville close to her.

"Nay," she said to him, "I pray you let me go forth alone."

But before the flame in his eye her own sank. She suffered him to lead her.

"I vow," said the Prince to Lady Flora as they moved towards the supper room, "I am indeed ready to do justice to the famed *cuisine* of Elm Park House!" (So was Lady Flo.)

Mr. Stafford drew a deep sigh and seemed to wake as from a dream.

"By the Lord," said he to himself. "I cannot regret what I have done. No, not though I'm like to have to make an early morning of it at carte and tierce with my lord. Gad—but she's a pearl! And the dog is in too much luck."

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

The next instant his eye lit upon Kitty almost in surprise. He had actually forgot her.

"Well, Mr. Stafford," said she, in a concentrated undertone, "you've made a pretty mess of everything to-night!"

Kitty did not bear defeat graciously. But Kitty, with large eyes softened by a mist of angry tears, red lips trembling in babyish fashion, was no such unattractive spectacle. And Mr. Stafford smiled involuntarily at her.

"Bah!" she pursued, "there's not a man that knows how to behave to a lady! How dared you clap your hands at the creature? Oh," said she, with a catch in her breath, "if my poor O'Hara had been here!"

Lord Mandeville paused. He and Rachel Peace stood alone in the hall.

"Sweetheart," he said, "I have asked no question yet. But now I must know; how come you here?"

She turned her face towards him and tried to look up. But her eyes fell.

"You parted from me in anger. My heart was like to break all those days. To-night—it was after the play—I had no courage left. A woman came to me—one



I did not know—and she put a card into my hand and said to me, ‘Go, if——’”

“If what?”

“If I would not lose you. I saw it was inscribed to the name of the lady—oh, my lord!—to the name of her whom people say you are to wed! And so I was seized with madness, I think—and so I came!”

Then, as once before this evening, she raised her head in pride.

“Let them think what they will of me,” she said, “but thee knows, my lord, there is no reason why I should not stand among your sister’s guests!”

“Do I not know it but too well?” he made answer. “Ah, Rachel; you are my despair and my glory!”





III

MR. DENIS O'HARA was distracted between ecstasy and despair.

It had so fallen out that the lady of his heart, the object of years of hopeless devotion, Mistress Kitty Bellairs, to wit—daintiest little widow that ever stepped through an obsequious world on high red heels!—was not to contract, after all, a certain magnificent alliance which would have been the death-blow to his own aspirations.

Furthermore, the circumstances of the breach between the wealthy widow and my lord Earl Mandeville had been such as to place the lady in the odious and unparalleled position of aggrieved party. Not to mince

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

words, the lovely Kitty had been jilted — she, the most notorious little jilt herself! In circumstances such as these, the Irishman (an experienced lover) had said to himself: “There’s no knowing.” Hence ecstasy!

But alas! what Mr. O’Hara knew but too well — what, indeed, demanded no effort of intellect for its realisation — was the vacuous state of his purse and the consequent impossibility of maintaining himself with any sort of credit within the brilliant circle that surrounded the rich widow. Hence despair!

Matters came to a crisis. He lost the last of his guineas at the *bouillotte* of my Lady Buckinghamshire’s mansion, in a gallant effort to retrieve his fortunes. Mistress Kitty Bellairs’ doors were yet closed to all the world, and her friends were still asked to believe that the little lady was a prey to the *grippe*. But this mood could not last long. Denis became desperate. He withdrew from company, spent the night over figures. He was not at the best of times particularly good at calculations, and the result of his strenuous vigil (a wet towel tied over his red curls to ensure coolness of brain action, a jug of delicately brewed rack-punch to stimulate activity of thought) was a couple

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

of innocent-looking figures, followed by such a distracting row of noughts as to make him empty the brew at a draught and fan himself with his wet towel.

“The curse of the crows is on it!” said the poor young man, a sorry, haggard spectacle in the grim winter dawn. “There’s no making the two ends of the candle meet at all, at all, over here. There’s nothing for it but I must all the way to Ireland and see if the old gentleman has left me a few sticks of trees to cut down, and what I can squeeze or coax out of the lawyer boys.”

Yes, he must go, and that forthwith. My Lord Verney would gladly lend him a handful of guineas—to go away withal; his landlady would trust him till his return. (Where was there a woman yet that would not trust O’Hara, the handsome ne’er-do-weel? Many a one, in truth, would have been glad to trust him further than he, with his single heart, was like to ask of her.)

On the noon after this tremendous resolution, Denis was ready to start. Verney’s gold jingled in his pocket. He had kissed his landlady, left a despairing love-letter at the inexorably barred door of Kitty in dungeon, and under the pale blue sky, misting

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

into dun city vapours, he mounted a mettlesome chestnut mare — “Red Beauty” yclept — lent from the stables of Mr. Stafford, a wealthy friend, and selected by him as “a good match for his hair!” (Mr. Stafford, like the rest of Mistress Bellairs’ little court, perhaps saw no disadvantage in the absence for a while from the town of the winning Mr. O’Hara.) Posting was expensive; coaching in winter weather and wintry roads was slow — aye, and too dull. Mr. Stafford’s friendly loan was opportune.

With light valise strapped on the crupper, with holsters well filled, with a handy hanger on his thigh, instead of the natty smallsword at which he was such an expert, Mr. O’Hara pricked his way down Knightsbridge towards the old Bath road — bent for Bristol — a solitary horseman, yet with none too heavy a heart, in spite of the uncertainty of his venture.

To have young blood in your veins and a singing soul, to feel a piece of good horse-flesh between your knees, to be independent and yet to be in love, to be setting forth on a hazard of risky fortunes and yet to have settled hopes — does a man need more to be happy?

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

A tolerably well-metalled turnpike road ringing to quick hoofs, a fair country opening out ever new and ever fairer, a glorious frosty sky above, and tart, tingling airs whipping the cheeks; the prospect of a strange inn-room and of unknown company for the night's halt; the arrival in the dark through the spice of lurking danger, the savour of unfamiliar country fare, and the smack of the nutty home-brewed against the palate; the traveller's tale in the ingle-nook by the fire, the drowsy comfort and the deep sleep; the awakening of a morning in a strange bed, and the looking out upon an unknown landscape under a fairy veil of frost. And next day, the start again, a fresh man into a fresh world, with the rested steed spurning the frozen ground with drum of iron! . . . It is a question, after all, whether the little frequent joys of life do not total a better sum of satisfaction than the rare ecstasies which make so great a demand upon our human limitations and leave such void behind.

True, this traveller would heave a heavy sigh ever and anon at the thought of the space and time he was putting, ever lengthening, between himself and his beloved. But

✻ LITTLE RED HEELS ✻

the next moment her name would be on his lips with a smile. And, after all, true lover as he was, he bore her with him: a most delicate and roguish dream-Kitty — and a far tenderer, if truth be told, than the same lady in the dainty flesh! For did she not, in his fancy, trot about his room on little red heels, and kiss him good night with a lace kerchief tied over her 'dark curls' (as once he had seen her at her toilet. Oh, lovely Kitty!).

And did she not ride behind him through the sparkle and tingle of the morning, an invisible Kitty on an invisible pillion, but with her sweet arms round his neck to keep his heart warm? Aye, and now and then whispered in his ear, to send the song of his soul carolling loud to those silent hedges, so furred with little icicles that not even a robin could pipe there?

The first halt at Hounslow; the next day "at the sign of the Angel," Woolhampton, where, after a mighty fine supper, Mr. O'Hara spent the night appropriately in roaming fields heavenly with his own particular conception of an angelic being — in red-heeled slippers, diamond buckled! And he started next day in the highest feather under quite

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

a warm middle-day sun, for just as far as his own humour and the mettle of friend Stafford's admirable chestnut mare would lead him.

They were now drawing near the high, flat wastes of Cold Ash gorse-fields, not many miles short of Newbury, when a bleak wind began to rise, whistling shrewishly in the rider's ears, and bringing such dull, chill mists up against the sky that all its ruddy sunset promise was lost in threats of snow. The soul of the impressionable Irishman became instantly affected.

"And faith!" said he, turning up the great collar of his *roquelaure* to his ears, and feeling the wind pinch the tip of his boots — "faith! and 't is the devil of a lonely journey to-day — not the nose of a nag in sight; not the tail of a coach; not even the rim of a highwayman's barker!" As this last thought hopped into his mind to the tune of his trot, a smile twisted his lips. "By my soul, and that's an idea!" said he. "I wonder, now, I haven't taken to the business myself, instead of starting this weary old way to Ireland!"

Once, in a fit of desperation, he had indeed promised Lydia (a person of prodig-

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

ious importance to all lovers of her mistress) to "go on the road," if necessary, and get her a diamond necklace in recognition of court service! He juggled with the thought for a minute or two, cheating himself out of his sudden sense of depression and loneliness by a vivid series of fancy pictures.

"There does not seem to be a gentleman now left in the profession, if all one hears of the road be true . . . I flatter myself," thought he, "that I could show them the way to do the thing!"

Tickled by the humorous thought, he gave his hat a truculent cock, loosened one of his pistols in its holster and looked round upon the leaden waste with the air of the most gallant desperado. The road ran along a high stretch of open grassland and then suddenly dipped, so that the view in front of the traveller was of flat spaces enclosed as in a cup of dull sky. Suddenly — in the midst of his mental antics — his eye was attracted by the silhouette of a man's hat, minute but distinct as if cut out of court plaster, rising upon this near horizon line. Under hat-silhouette followed promptly silhouette of flying cloak, then silhouette of straining horse.

"Company, be jabbers!" cried Denis

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

jovially. And, as he and the new-comer drew nearer to each other, he gathered up his reins to make the chestnut strike out with elegance.

"He's come apace," thought the Irishman, "whoever he be. That beast of his is dead beat; the legs are trembling under him. And by me soul! what sort of company is it at all? . . . Bad, I'm thinking."

The stranger indeed bore no very prepossessing appearance; and the occupation in which he was engaged as, with reins loose upon its neck, his exhausted, sweat-matted steed toiled up the incline, was not the most reassuring one in the world. With feverishly hurried hands he was, in fact, reloading a long horse-pistol. About his garments there was a flaunting air of shabby smartness; upon his countenance (which was marked for observation by a dismal length of copper-red nose) a scowling anxiety that tried in vain to assume the easy airs of dash and impudence. He lowered up from his pistol to Denis as the latter, with an engaging smile, drew rein within a few yards; then he flung a swift backward look over his shoulder. In both glances there was a background spark of craven fear.

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

"Oho and oho!" said Denis to himself with a leap of the blood. Then his smiling lip curled. "And did I not say that there was not a gentleman in it? Oh, shade of my gay Duval! Alas, gallant Maclean! what sorry scion of your race is this?"

"You ride lonely, sir," began he aloud, addressing the stranger.

"For the matter of that, sir," answered the latter, after a slight pause, balancing the now reloaded pistol in his right hand and gathering the reins in his left as he spoke—"for the matter of that, sir, so do you."

"And you have ridden fast, I mark, sir," pursued O'Hara genially.

"Pray, sir," snarled the other, "what is that to you?"

As he spoke, his furtive eye shifted from O'Hara's smiling countenance to the points of the dancing mare, and thereupon became filled with a sinister, greedy glow. On his side, with bridle hand warily alert, and purposely keeping Red Beauty on the move to frustrate sudden attack, the Irishman pursued with unperturbed amiability—

"Agreed! A gentleman may have his reasons, eh, friend?"

"Reasons? Reasons? Hell, sir! I have

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

no more reasons than another man. I'll have you know, sir, that I'm none of your fellows with reasons. I will drive any man's teeth down his throat who dares to say I have reasons!"

"Upon my life, a lad of richest humour!" cried O'Hara, addressing the wind. "Indeed, sir," added he, then, in a more personal manner, "it is evident I did you infinite wrong. Spare my teeth, for I have a pretty smile (or, so the ladies say), and I will make the handsome admission that you have no reason on this road, or off it either."

So very uneasy became the degenerate Duval under Mr. O'Hara's playful banter that it was quite obvious that he hesitated between instant flight or instant attack. Choler, however, had the better of him. A threatening gleam appeared in his eye; his long pistol inclined towards an attitude to match. Denis instantly pushed the mare sidling a pace nearer. In proportion to her advance the stranger drew his exhausted horse stumbling obliquely away.

"That is, no doubt, a remarkable weapon of yours, sir," quoth Lord Kilcroney's heir in that tone of delicate, taunting irony that was so wasted here. "Must have been used

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

at Blenheim. Old fashioned, but useful, no doubt. Fie on it, though, for its useless length of nose! A long nose, sir, is a mistake, if you can avoid it—in a pistol, I mean. What would you think now, I wonder, of the build of this pretty one?" And Mr. O'Hara (who had been holding his adversary with a fierce, dilating eye, almost as round as a pistol-rim in its wide-opened lids) here, with a swift and elegant motion of his long, gauntleted right hand, extracted the easy-sitting pistol, and, in his turn, balanced it with as much significance as the bully, but a vast more of elegance.

"Rigby's latest pattern, sir. The creature has a pretty voice. Hark to it clear its throat!" As he spoke, he set the cock, and the click rang sharp and musical. "I can recommend Rigby, of Dublin Town. With a Rigby, sir, a gentleman can have reasons on the road."

"Can he? can he, sir? can he?" exclaimed the rider, with a sudden blustering outburst, as uncertain in its aim as the wavering weapon in his hand—"can he? And gentleman, forsooth! I'll have you know by—by—and, by Hell! that, gentleman or no gentleman, no one has right or

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

reason, on this road when I ride. When I ride, d'ye hear? And that by ancient rules of the High Toby!"

"Rules of the High Toby!" echoed O'Hara, vastly entertained by the sound of the unknown cant. "High Toby, sir? Any connection with little Toby Philpott?" cried he. "Yet, if I take your meaning, a somewhat more dangerous person. An acquaintance like enough to lead on to the Jug! Eh? Rules of High Toby, say you? Will they not bring a man so high that he may end by dancing on air?"

"'Sdeath!" cried the Knight of the Road, and grew grey all but his copper nose. Upon which, to nerve himself, he called upon fury again. But all the time his frightened hare of an eye fluttered from O'Hara's pistol back to the road that dipped into the valley. "The devil is in your flummery!" he yelled. "No gentleman, I say, shall ride on my road, as I'll very soon show you."

He wrenched at his horse's reins, but the wretched creature, in the vain effort to answer his master's call, faltered, floundered, and nearly fell. In the midst of his flying oaths O'Hara noted once again the covetous gaze enveloping his own splendid mount.

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

"Aha!" cried the alert gentleman to himself. "So 't is the mare he's after!" And instantly, by a twist of the reins and a spur of the heel, Mr. O'Hara whisked round upon his adversary, flanking out of the line of the pistol just as this latter was, at last, brought to a decided point.

"So that's the game?" he cried, with the exultation that any prospect of conflict never failed to bring him. "A match, brother Turpin, a match! Barker for barker, my Rigby against your Long-nose. I refer, sir, to that interesting heirloom of good Queen Anne's days, your pistol."

But the aggrieved highwayman, apparently, was not used to take professional work in so light-hearted a manner; the intruder's airy agility of wit disconcerted him even more than his steadiness of hand and the nimbleness of his equitation. Again he hesitated, again flung a darkling look upon the coveted steed. Then, to O'Hara's mingled disappointment and amusement, muttering between his teeth a handsomely larded phrase to the effect of his having no time to waste on fools, fairly turned tail and set off along the grey road at the best of his sorry nag's speed. And ever and anon the backward look!

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

It was this backward look that kept Denis from pricking in pursuit.

"Why, the creature's no more liver on him than a white rabbit!" cried he dolefully as he watched him out of sight.

Nevertheless, for all its disappointing issue, this little encounter had pleasantly enlivened Mr. O'Hara. He started down the hill at a brisk trot.

"I smell snow," said he, and thought of the "Pelican" a few miles ahead—a hostelry he was well acquainted with—and of a ruddy fire and a steaming brew.

Upon the lower level he passed once more into the land of hedges and fields; rode under the shade of Dunstan Park woods, naked, yet sheltering. There, upon ground where the frost had not lain, and the stepping was softer, between ditches full of sodden, pungent leaves, the mare broke into a joyous canter to the tune of a fresh dance of little red heels in the rider's heart.

And thus cantering, they came at the turn of the road upon a high, yellow chaise that travelled in the direction of Newbury, at a melancholy and uncertain rate. O'Hara would have sped past without bestowing

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

more than a glance but for the sounds of wrangling which rose loud into the wintry silence—wrangling in the midst of which something familiar, in a pipy voice and an affected, mincing speech, seemed to strike his ear. He wheeled Red Beauty suddenly round. A surly-looking post-boy, with eyes well-nigh as furtive as those of his recent road acquaintance, pulled the horses to a standstill.

“By my noble fathers’ thirst, whom have we here?” cried O’Hara.

The clamour in the gig was succeeded by a hush. Then: “Oh, lord!” rose a voice, quavering in terror, “is this another of them?” Upon which, the shrill accents which O’Hara seemed to have recognised cut in, acid: “Get out your pistals, paltroon. A carse on my good nature—that I should have ever have cansarted with a City dag! Rat you, you mast do the fighting, this time!”

“Spoicer! as I live! ’Tis Spoicer!” exclaimed Lord Kilcrouney’s heir, with a great burst of laughter. Through the window a long, lean, deathlike face was gingerly protruded. At sight of rider it broke into a sickly smile.

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

"Tare and 'ouns, man!" Mr. O'Hara called out, "what's up with you? You look like a fresh-made corpse! 'Tis n't considerate to suggest a wake when there's not a bottle within miles."

"I've been wounded, Mr. O'Hara," responded the gentleman with dignity. "Stapped in broad daylight, too, set apon, rabbed, wounded ——"

He raised his right arm, bound with a blood-stained napkin, nursing it upon his left hand for O'Hara's inspection. But if he expected sympathy, he was disappointed. O'Hara gave a long whistle. This explained the re-loading performance of Copper-nose! A calf-like bleat of terror from within the chaise brought him back to the present circumstances.

"Come, Spicer," quoth he, "let us see what you've got in there. Something young and tender and green, as usual, I'll warrant! A gosling with some lard on him, I'll stake my life, or you would not be his bear-leader! Come, young sir!" knocking jovially with the butt of his whip on the taut leather of the hood. "Show yourself! Your money is safe from me."

"Money!" responded the bleat, pitifully,

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

while its owner displayed at the same time a pale, silly, flabby visage of remarkable immaturity.

"Money, sir!" echoed Spicer, again thrusting himself into prominence. "Did I not tell you, man, that I have been rabbed? Rabbed of near everything, sir. We have been fallowed, 't is my belief, all the way from Hounslow. This fool would prate of our gold from inn to inn——"

"Now," thought O'Hara, "the story unfolds. Now is made plain the reason of friend Copper-nose's foundered nag! A stern chase is a long chase, as your privateersman has it."

Meanwhile — "*Our* money! 'T was *my* money!" the poor calf was whimpering. "Three hundred guineas . . . in a sealskin bag — Aunt Matilda's legacy — all gone, all gone!"

Now, the devil would have it that Mr. O'Hara must always see the joke of the situation. No sooner had this moving tale fallen upon his ear than he set up such a laugh that the very crows at the top of Dunstan trees took wing with scandalised cawing.

That Captain Spicer, the ingenious gentle-

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

man whose main business in life was to teach the rich greenhorn the ways (and byways) of the fashionable world — a business requiring much delicacy of handling, but, in a general way, very lucrative indeed — that Captain Spicer should thus have the fruit of probably many days' diplomacy whisked away from under his nose, without (as the Irishman phrased it to himself) as much as a bite. The story was rich!

"'Pon my soul, Spicer," quoth he, "I'm sorry for you!"

He glanced at the surly post-boy. Then thought of the long-nosed man and his frightened eye — and laughed again, this time scornfully.

"Scarce the crow of a mouse between the two of them, and a confederate to drive the pair and send notice! Ha! Copper-nose had a simple job here . . . but he had a long race for his three hundred guineas. No wonder he longed for my Red Beauty. Three hundred guineas, and but a dead lame nag to scuttle away with them — not five miles in the poor beast left."

"Little thought I," cried the led captain, with fresh acrimony, "when I cansented to give the creature — this Haggins, old Hag-

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

gins, the silversmith's nephew, pah! the benefit of my company and countenance at Bath, that I had to deal with a coward — yes, Mr. Haggins, a coward, that is what I said."

"Zounds!" cried the goaded Huggins. "You screeched out that you were murdered, Captain Spicer, sir! And, if you please, the scoundrel's pistol was at my head, sir!"

"Whereupan, sir," said Spicer, sneering hideously, "you handed him your sealskin bag, as palitely, sir, as if you were handing a snaff-bax, sir, aver your father's counter, sir. But it serves me right, for candescending to the City ——"

"And why, Spicer, why? What would you expect of a City gentleman but counter courage?" cried O'Hara in the highest humour. "Mr. Huggins, 'tis evident, has been brought up to regard life from the safe side."

He had perforce to supply himself the applause to his own quip, for neither of the combatants saw the point.

"And for the matter of that, Captain Spicer," retorted the calf, between tears and fury, "if you'd shot a little straighter yourself, sir, I should not be now ——"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"'Tis all the gratitude I get, you see, O'Hara. Wounded, grievously wounded, and talked to, by Gad, talked to by this fallow! A serious wound, O'Hara — nay, two wounds; for, blast me if the rascal's ball did not go in at one side of my arm, and out at the other!"

"Went out, did it, now? And prodigious obliging of it!" cried the cheerful rider. "'T will save the surgeon's fee."

"Three hundred guineas!" ejaculated Mr. Huggins again, with a sudden yelp, as if the memory of his wrongs had been driven into him with a brad-awl.

"Three hundred guineas!" A second or two Mr. O'Hara sat stock still in his saddle, staring across the chaise towards the fields beyond. A few feathery white flakes came undulating downwards from the leaden sky. Here in this valley road there was shelter from the wind, and the flakes fell fantastic slow. His brow was drawn with deep thought. Presently a slow smile overspread his countenance.

Within the chaise the pair were once more at their wrangling. Upon his patient horse the post-boy with the uneasy eye sat motionless, the image of sullen waiting.

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

"Good Gad, man!" the Captain was saying, "will you never have dan? And by the way," exclaimed he with sudden snarl, "rat me if I know what we are loitering here for. Carse that post-boy! Drive on, rascal, will you!"

Denis awoke from his abstraction with a start. "Farewell, then, my lively lads," quoth he, "for here our ways diverge."

And then it was instructive to hear the gallant captain bestow as many curses on the post-boy for starting as the instant before for standing still. "Split him! Rat him and for ever blast him! Did he not see that he was speaking to the gentleman?"

"Oh, Denis!" next quoth he in piteousness, "you are not going to leave us?"

"Why, tare and ages!" cried the Irishman in contempt, "(and Denis me no Denises, if you please, Captain Spicer!) do you think you will be stopped for your beauty next? Why, there is your post-boy will answer to any gentleman of the road that you're not worth the stopping—eh, friend?" He reached the lad a smart tap on the shoulder with his riding-whip, whereat that individual let fly between his horse's ears a growling asseveration as to his utter ignorance of

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

what the gentleman could mean, but refrained from allowing the candour of his visage to be scanned.

"Four lonely miles," groaned Spicer, "and I a wounded man!"

"Why, what is that but two apiece — not to speak of the boy and the horses?" cried O'Hara, with his pitiless laugh. "Sorry, my noble captain, but I have business in this neighbourhood."

He took off his hat with a splendid flourish, wheeled the chestnut abruptly round and up a by-lane, and was off at so brisk a pace that before the dismal travellers in the chaise could utter another protest he was out of their sight.

"Unless I am much mistaken," reflected the ingenious gentleman, "this path must lead round the park to the turnpike again."

And, truly, out on the turnpike again he came, before the fast falling shades of the winter night had gathered to much more perceptible density.

"And now, Red Beauty, my dainty one," cried he to his mare, as he shook the reins, and the mettled beast responded instantly by breaking into her long, easy canter, "'t is a race for love, when all's said and done.

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

And as good a joke; aha! as ever was heard, into the bargain! Bravo, my lady! Never a touch of the spur shall your side get from me. Why, begorrah! 'tis the born hunter you are. Give me the red-haired ones! No wonder Copper-nose wanted you."

Having breasted the long ascent from the valley in easy sprints—for, keen as he was upon his quarry, O'Hara was too true a sportsman to press a willing steed—they reached again those bleak wastes appropriately dubbed Cold Ash, and then, with the wind at their back, let fly through the driving dusk at topmost speed. Here blew a whistling wind that scarce permitted a snowflake to fall, while the laden clouds hung ever closer and more lowering above the darkening land.

It was that dim and deceitful hour—"twixt dog and wolf," as the French have it—when shadows and objects are intermingled and outlines lost. Still the road stretched straight, a paler grey amid the deeper. And if, once or twice, the chestnut shied, it was but when some distorted, wind-nipped, ragged tree seemed to leap, black at her, out of the world of shadows. Denis

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

found the situation fitting his humour — he tasted with delight the contrast between his whipped-up blood and the dead-cold approach of night, between the desolation of the scene and his own luminous fancies; the rapid motion, of itself an exhilaration; and, over all, the sense of personal danger, which was always the finest spice of life to him.

“But another mile or so,” he reckoned, “my beauty, and you and I will have a few more words to say to this High Toby gentleman and his sorry nag.”

The chuckle was yet on his lips when the swinging pace beneath him was violently checked; and the next instant the chestnut, snorting in fury and fear, was rearing from the indignity of a brutal grasp on her bridle. Denis had scarce time to realise that the way was blocked by some just distinguishable bulky mass — a dead horse: it seemed to be just across the road — and that a man had sprung at his mare’s head, before a husky shout commanded him to dismount.

“Begorrah!” cried he, “and is it on the top of you I am, before I’d time to overtake you?”

No sooner had the mocking Irish voice

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

fallen upon the air than, with a cursing "Oh! it's you, is it?" the man gave another furious tug at the bridle and at the same moment fired. A hot streak of flame passed, singing, close above O'Hara's ear. Instantly, with the joyous alacrity of the born fighter, his every instinct leaped to the emergency. By the broad yellow flash he had seen, painted as it were upon the black canvas of the night, a vision of an evil, haggard countenance, of a long, red nose.

"Now we know where we are! Steady!" quoth he, and bent over on the side of his assailant. "Aha, friend!" he cried with loud exultation, and darted out a quick long arm. Before the pistol had time to fall from the pointing, he had seized it by its smoking long barrel and wrenched it away. "Did I not tell thee that long noses were a mistake?" he cried, as he struck.

The heavy butt caught the highwayman between the eyes. There was heard the thud of his fall upon the road, and the kind of snuffling sob that accompanied it.

Red Beauty, now released, made a very pretty display of outraged feeling, which O'Hara, understanding equine nature, had,

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

however, little trouble in calming. He was soon able to dismount.

"Troth!" said he, fondling her neck, "'t is the way of your sex to carry a man into danger, and 't is the way of ours to love you the more. It's yourself that the rogue coveted, my Red Beauty," said he; "but you were never foaled to carry such scum as he."

The intelligent creature thrust her head towards him in the dark and lipped his cheek with velvet touch.

"Yes, yes," answered he, "that was a lucky shy of yours!" He ran his hand across his ear, and, where he was wont to meet the crisp bunch of curls *à la brigadière*, met a deplorable flatness. "A close shave, by thunder! What will Kitty think of this? Well, better a curl than a life . . . You saved us both, I'm thinking," he went on, again flattering the mare's neck. "Indeed, colleen, it's borne in upon me that we were made for each other. And if that sealskin bag but has half what Spoicer reckoned on, why, then, you and I shall not part."

He slung the reins over his arms. Red Beauty was now all tranquil condescension. If truth were told, perhaps, she had the

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

curiosity of her sex, and was quite aware that something interesting was afoot.

Mr. O'Hara advanced cautiously towards the smaller of the indistinct black heaps, that still showed vaguely upon the pale roadway in spite of the ever deepening night. He knelt down and passed his hand over the prostrate figure.

Not dead! Well, that was a relief. Denis was of those who think little enough of life or death, for himself or for others; but there was not in him the stuff of the executioner.

"He'll live to be hanged yet," said he to himself. Certainly not dead. And, indeed, if sundry jerks and heaving breaths beneath his touch, sundry grunts that met his ears, be taken as indications, Copper-nose was rapidly nearing consciousness again. "But 't were well 't were done quickly," as little Davy Garrick says in the play," muttered Denis. And running the reins up to his shoulder, he now brought both hands to his task. "What's this, now? The fellow of the barker that snapped at me in the belt! There now, friend, that will give you more room to breathe; and I'm thinking, anyhow, it's as well in safe keeping," he murmured, slipping the man's remaining pistol into his

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

own belt. "'Pon my soul! little did I ever think I'd come to take a purse, and off a highwayman, too. Aha! What have we here? The sealskin bag, as I live! Easy, now, brother; don't be groaning that way. It's not a ha'porth of harm I'm doing you but relieving your conscience. Faith, I've as good a right to it as you, this night . . . and a deal better than Spicer any night of the year!"

His fingers were, indeed, in contact with a smooth, furry surface, under which rose a succession of hard little cylinders. This set his hand trembling.

"The little gold boys — or may I never fight again!"

The bag was strapped to the man's leather belt, and to get at it required some manipulation. Master Copper-nose, moreover, presently began to struggle; and C'Hara, who up to this moment had been perhaps a little half-hearted about the rifling business, now became exhilarated to interest, and set to work *con amore*. Hampered as he was by Red Beauty's reins, it was after a pretty severe wrestling match that he succeeded in drawing his hanger, cutting the recalcitrant straps, and possessing himself triumphantly

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

of the weighty bag. The highwayman gave a despairing howl as he suddenly realised that the fruit of his long day's work was finally reft from him. He made a wild clutch at his rival when the latter rose to his feet : but his fingers, in the dark, struck against cold steel.

"Give it up, man!" came those laughing tones that from the very first had filled him with hatred and yet superstitious fear. "Give it up, brother of the High Toby, unless you've got another pair of heirlooms to match your nose."

The man had staggered up. Nothing but shadows were they now to each other in the universal blackness ; but each could hear the other's breathing. O'Hara's was caught with exultant laughter ; the highwayman's was stertorous with impotent fury. To emphasise his remarks, then, Denis playfully drew the captured pistol from his belt and clicked the lock meaningly. And upon this there was a crash as of some wild animal plunging into cover, a stumbling rush of feet, sounds of flight, quickly carried away on the wings of the wind.

As O'Hara stood listening, the blast fled by him over the hill and left a deep inter-

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

lude of silence in which he could catch no sound but Red Beauty's soft, inquisitive breathing at his elbow. He sent a loud laugh after the retreating knight, then he weighed the bag in his hands.

"Three hundred guineas, they said! I'd have been lucky if I'd got the half of it in the Old Country! . . . That's back to Kitty! She will have had time to miss me, not time to replace me. Glory be to God!" cried Denis O'Hara.

But now, being a man of money, a man of worth, Mr. O'Hara became mighty cautious. The first thing to be done was to distribute the rouleaux among his various pockets and cast the now limp recipient into the roadside ditch. The next was to decide upon his own movements. Restraining, though not without a sigh, his natural inclination, which was Londonwards, he turned Red Beauty's head towards Speenhamland, near Newbury, the nearest halt, and was for mounting once more, when he paused.

"There's the poor comrade yonder," quoth he, "whom we must not leave in extremity, if he's not past help. We owe him that, colleen." And leading the mare, he retraced his steps once more. Red Beauty

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

craned her neck and drew deeper breaths of sympathy over the body of her fallen brother.

"Aye," said O'Hara, after a second's examination, "stone dead. His heart's broke, my colleen, and well for it. And if I've left my mark on Copper-nose, 't is no more than he deserves."

But it was high time that Denis O'Hara should place himself, his borrowed steed, and captured wealth under shelter. The snow-storm was gathering and the winds on these high, bleak lands came charged with stinging flakes.

"We'll take it steady, but easy and cautious, love," said he, once more swinging himself into the saddle.

.
At the door of

The famous inn in Speenhamland
That stands below the hill,
And rightly called "The Pelican,"
From its enormous bill

(as a wit of the period sang of that excellent house of entertainment), came a red-haired traveller upon a red-coated mare, both somewhat the worse for a difficult journey in the dark through a settled snowstorm.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Perished though he was, O'Hara, whose soft heart had ached over the fate of the highwayman's steed, would be content to-night to let no one see to his mare except himself. Having, therefore, seen her rubbed down to his own satisfaction, seen her at last stand in the best stall up to her belly in golden straw; having coaxed her to her feed with a warm mash, and satisfied himself that the capricious lady had really a good appetite in spite of some coquetting, he passed into the hostelry.

Here he was not an unknown guest. The length of the "Pelican's" bill was no deterrent to him: when he had a guinea, he spent it with the delightful ease of the impecunious, where another would haggle over a shilling. Thus it was with the familiarity of the intimate that, cocking his hat so as to conceal the loss of the curl, upon which he desired no question, he marched straight from the stable into the kitchen, where he knew he would find a roaring sea-coal fire, for the comforting of the chilled and sodden outer man; where he would furthermore be able to choose on the spot the particular refreshment that seemed best suited for the cheering of the inner.

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

Now, the first object that met his airy glance, as he advanced into the rosy circle flung out by the glowing hearth, was the dubious post-boy of the yellow chaise, shovelling rabbit-pie into his own anatomy with as much gusto as might the most honest of Britons. The next instant, he beheld, seated in an attitude of utmost dejection, supporting an elaborately curled wig upon a limp fist, no less interesting a person than the whilom owner of the guinea rolls. So unexpected was the encounter, Newbury having been the declared destination of the yellow chaise, that for the moment it had the remarkable effect of depriving Mr. O'Hara of speech.

Suddenly, however, interrupting mine host upon the eulogy of spiced veal-pie and woodcock on toast to follow, he strode up to the table and tapped it with his riding-whip in front of Spicer's disconsolate, plucked, and now useless, pigeon.

"Have we not met before, sir?"

Mr. Huggins looked up with a dismal, unillumined eye, and evidently failed to recognise the speaker. The post-boy became more absorbed than ever in his supper.

"Surely," went on Mr. O'Hara, "you are the traveller whom I encountered this after-

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

noon. Some little misadventure, I understand, had just befallen you."

, "Little misadventure! Aye, sir, I had just been robbed — all I had!" said the poor youth, with dull, unconscious irony.

The landlord had followed O'Hara's move with some curiosity.

"I've offered the young man to make him a present of supper and bed," he here observed in tones of important philanthropy, "but he declines to partake."

Mr. O'Hara wheeled round upon him with some sternness. A man is never more disposed to rebuke his neighbour as when his own conscience is slightly uncomfortable.

"And pray, Mr. Landlord, how comes it that you have stationed this young gentleman in the kitchen with his own post-boy?"

The landlord entered into a prodigious state of surprise and discomfiture. He plumed himself—indeed, with some truth—on having an instinct for a gentleman; and knew that brocade and lacè did not suffice to the making of one. He stammered a hasty apology, turning from the disconsolate youth in his rich City garb to the mud-spattered, plain-coated Irishman, whose genial, clean-cut face was just now as haughty

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

as ever any English peer's could be. He had not known. It was a strange story. It was very clear the young gentleman (Mr. Huggins was promoted!) could not pay shot. And Captain Spicer (who had gone to bed in the best room upstairs, with every attention for his wound) Captain Spicer, whom probably Mr. O'Hara knew, had warned the landlord that he disclaimed all pecuniary responsibility.

"Captain Spicer!" ejaculated O'Hara, with such a twist of contempt on his lips that mine host of the "Pelican" perceived that he was here on the wrong track, and quickly abandoned it. "If he had known that the Honourable Mr. O'Hara, son of that well-known and admirable nobleman my Lord Kilcrone, took an interest——"

Again O'Hara cut him short. With an impatient wave of his hand, "That'll do!" cried he. "Had you known Mr. Huggins's consequence, you'd have stripped your breast bare for him — would you not, you old Pelican, you?"

Mr. Huggins, on his side, hearing of the consequence of his interpellator, was no whit less obsequiously moved than his grudging host.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"The Hon. Mr. O'Hara!" quoth he, rising to his feet and making a series of City legs. "I am honoured, sir, vastly honoured." Then, with a return of his first bleat: "Your friend, sir, Captain Spicer, has abandoned me."

Thereupon ensued a rambling statement, in which the tedium of a silversmith's life, the relief of Aunt Matilda's legacy, were intermingled with lamentations upon the hard fate that had overtaken him: the prospect of an immediate return to desk and grind.

O'Hara stood gazing at him in his unwontedly cogitative mood. "Sure," he was thinking, "it would be doing an owl of that kidney no good turn to give him back the money. . . . What would the green-goose do with it but make an ass of himself — and him that already?"

Aloud he bade the landlord serve up supper for two in the parlour, and then, informing Mr. Huggins that he would expect him in a quarter of an hour, turned away abruptly to avoid the gratitude that overcame the young cit.

A genial meal loosens the tongues of even uncongenial companions; and Mr. O'Hara

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

was not of the kind to make any guest of his feel the inferiority of social station. Nevertheless, had the post-boy been but a more lively sort of rascal, the Irishman would no doubt have preferred his society to that of the little vulgar, pasty-faced clerk.

After a bumper or two, a kind of sparkle had come to the latter's watery eye. And, freed from his first hampering assumption of fine manners, he began to let his tongue wag with all its native impudence and folly. Between the picking of the last woodcock bone and the cracking of the first walnut, Mr. O'Hara was made the recipient of his innermost confidences.

"Young Calico's a rip, begorrah! of the first water — first gutter water! The cock of the tavern, the buck of Cheapside wenches!" Upon this summary of his guest, Mr. O'Hara — a silk handkerchief tied over his mutilated curl — leant back in his chair and surveyed him through half-closed lids with something of pity mixed with his contempt.

"And by goles!" Mr. Huggins was saying, as he reached unceremoniously for the bottle, "I can give you as good a song, though I say it, as any lad of ours among the 'Harmonious Owls.'"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Harmonious Owls?" inquired O'Hara, tickled as was his wont by any picturesque combination of words.

"Aye, my boy! — Honourable sir, I mean — 't is our club in Little Britain. A set of fellows, oh! they could show you a bit of life! We meet o' Saturday nights. Aye, and there's the 'Bleeding Cross-Bones,' down Knightrider Lane. That is a club! There's play at 'the Bones,' sir, I tell you," said Mr. Huggins, leaning forward and speaking in a husky whisper. "I won nine guineas there, one night. At single sitting, sir."

"Thunder and turf! say you so?"

"I could give you a bit of a new song that took them mightily among the Howls — the Owls, I should say."

Mr. O'Hara sat quickly up in his chair and flung out a forbidding hand, as Mr. Huggins uplifted a dismal voice and carolled: —

"Oh, where is the harm of a little kiss —

One, one, only one?

And what can the heart —"

"Peace!" cried the Irishman with loud authority, slapping the table with his open

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

hand. And as the other stared, open-mouthed, round-eyed: "'Tis my infirmity, sir," proceeded Denis more civilly. "Music, somehow, turns my wine sour on me. It comes, Mr. Huggins, doubtless, from an error in my upbringing; my head was not made early enough. I'm obliged to concentrate, sir, to give my attention to the bottle."

While gravely dealing out this farrago, which had the desired effect of completely nonplussing the young man, Mr. O'Hara's wits were busy upon a little scheme suggested by a chance boast of his companion. One might, after all, get an hour or two of entertainment out of the back-street buck, if 't were true he was such a ruffler at the dice and the cards. "And if this jot-down-nought-and-carry-one has, as he says, swept the mighty sum of nine guineas from his fellow 'prentices, he's as good a chance of winning his three hundred from me!"

There was a quaintness about the idea that pleased Mr. O'Hara prodigiously. And, indeed, he would not have been O'Hara had not the temptation of putting all his fortunes to the hazard again been irresistible.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed suddenly,

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"but you're a young gentleman of prodigious accomplishment! And what, Mr. Huggins, may I inquire, is your favourite game?"

"Why," cried the clerk, "I am reckoned, sir, dangerous at piquet. And there are many, sir, who had rather be my partner at whist. But when the humour is on me to play high," said Master Huggins, tossing down the end of his glass with a knowing turn of wrist, "then nothing, to my mind, comes up to faro; though basset, indeed, and ombre, and lanterloo, and quinze, are reckoned fair games, and also lansquenet, quadrille, and ——"

"Nay," said O'Hara, breaking the chain, "I am with you. Faro is a pretty game — between gentlemen. Faro's the game! What say you to a deal or two?"

"By goles!" cried the clerk, and a greedy joy spread over his countenance, "but you're a gentleman after my own heart!" Then he suddenly clapped his hands against his pockets, and his jaw dropped. "Ud's bones! I was forgetting! Cleaned out! Unless you will throw with me for my buttons — silver, on my honour, and a pretty fancy ——"

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

"Oh, pooh, Mr. Huggins!" cried O'Hara, "between gentlemen! Sir, your misadventure might have occurred to anyone—to anyone of your constitutional modesty. You've learned that 't is a mistake to be at all backward in coming forward when the call is pistols, that's all! I shall be charmed to oblige you, sir, by the loan of a few pieces. The note of hand of so well known a person as yourself is as good as the Bank, I've no doubt. Shall it be, to begin with, a trifle of ten?"

"Oh, make it a guinea, sir," said the dashing cit in superior tones.

"Now, here's a lad of spirit!" cried O'Hara, breaking into loud laughter. "By my father's last bottle, sir! I like your humour!"

He swept a clear space on the table as he spoke, and spread thereupon, in shining array, ten of Verney's guineas. "I'm a bad arithmetician," he went on; "I've not had your education, and it comes easier to me to reckon in gold coin.—Will you hold the bank, or shall I?"

Gog and Magog! How their bold, 'prentice son kept up the credit of City valour and

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

pledged his own that winter night, at the "Pelican," Speenham, on the Bath road! At first, indeed, he won; and all that were left of my Lord Verney's thirty guineas found themselves heaped in a pile by the side of his glass. And Mr. O'Hara (enjoying himself hugely) began to see the moment when he would have surreptitiously to break one of those rouleaux that lay so snug in his pockets.

But it seemed fated that Aunt Matilda's legacy was not to benefit her gay young dog of a nephew; for, from the moment when it was likely to come once more into action, the luck turned. And first my Lord Verney's guineas found their way back to Mr. O'Hara's side of the table. Then a bundle of I. O. U.'s began to grow beneath that gentleman's elbow—the earlier ones neatly engrossed in Mr. Huggins's most clerkly hand, those succeeding growing wilder and wilder as that gentleman's spirits approached desperation. They called for more wine; they called for fresh candles. Rouleau by rouleau, the travelled gold passed *de jure* into the pockets where it already reposed *de facto*.

"Your luck's bitter bad, my young friend.

[138]

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

Have you ever tried, at the 'Bleeding Bones,' what the turning of your coat will do for you? 'T is a practice you may on occasion see at White's."

It took the muddled wits of the city-bred youth a full minute to grasp the purport of this advice. When, however, he had done so, he carried it out with such tipsy precipitation, and the figure he cut when the change was at last effected and he sat down once more, clad in the bright red lining, was so exquisitely comic, that Mr. O'Hara fell into inextinguishable laughter.

"Glory be to God," said he. "If that does not propitiate the Fates——! Why, 't is a little Lord Mayor you 're destined to be, and no mistake!"

"*Paroly!* I'll go *paroly!*" cried the future Lord Mayor in a thick voice, falling once more upon his cards with a froglike plunge.

"Devil mend you!" muttered O'Hara to himself. "You'd go St. Paul's and the Bank of England on the value of a lock of your hair! Here has the green calf lost his Aunt Matilda's legacy twice, and he'll double or quits me with never a stiver to stake! But, by the Lord! I'll do it—and win my

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

chances with Kitty for the third time! 'There's luck in odd numbers,' says Rory O'More!" And aloud: "Done with you, my gay punter!"

The cards were shuffled and again dealt upon the table.—And Mr. Huggins gazed, horror-struck.

Then, in the silence, Mr. O'Hara poured himself the last glass and tossed it down. For a "head that had not been made early," his had a wonderful capacity for remaining on the intelligent side of exhilaration through a very mighty potation. But then (as he would explain to the neophyte) "you can get through a deal of claret with the help of a bottle of port." And he was always careful to top up with the more generous fellow.

"God bless you, Kitty!" said he, in his soul, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, as the final mellow drop ran down his throat. "I shall have a sight of your pretty face the day after to-morrow."

"And now, sir," he asked, "how do we stand with regard to each other?"

Mr. Huggins started from his sodden trance of horror. The words had fallen upon him like buckets of cold water. The

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

I. O. U.'s lay spread out in eloquent array. There was a rapid, merciless little calculation.

"I take it, sir," said O'Hara, dropping his pencil, "that you owe me some six hundred guineas. Or will you kindly verify!"

Verify! The clerk flung out his arms upon the table, dropped his head over them, and gave vent to a bellow of utter misery. Six hundred guineas! With the three hundred of which he had been robbed, nine hundred! What a sum for a City youth, worth at highest calculation some fifty shillings a week! He had the vaguest notions of the manner in which such a debt might be enforced in the high circles to which his opponent belonged — whether by prison, or, yet more awful contingency, by pistols!

Mr. O'Hara rose from his seat and walked over to the fireplace. From that point of vantage, warming his coat-tails, he gazed philosophically, though not unbenevolently, upon the prostrate and howling youth.

"Begorrah! the poor little cur! 't is the voice of a bullock he's got!"

After a moment or two he approached the table once more and tapped the young gambler sharply on the shoulder. Then, without

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

a word, gathering together the valuable autographs, held them up solemnly before the youth's staring eyes; and then, still in silence, but with a certain air of ceremony, crushed them into a tight ball, which he finally flung into the fire.

The clerk sprang to his feet, uncertain, trembling, scarcely daring to interpret the action to his own relief, so unspeakable did that relief appear. Upon this Mr. O'Hara spoke in the most mellifluous yet doctoral accents that it is possible to conceive.

"Let this be a lesson to you, young man. For the future be content with the humble lot which Providence has marked as your own. Devote yourself to the low virtues of your state in life, and refrain from endeavouring to improve yourself by imitating the high vices of your betters. Another than myself, Mr. Huggins, be assured of it, would not have ——" He paused impressively and waved his hand towards the fire.

The little cit — no very attractive spectacle in his turned coat, with his pale, puffy, red-eyed face — here fairly broke down and burst into tears. But they were tears of the grateful and the shamed. O'Hara stalked over to the table with a magisterial gait

❧ LITTLE RED HEELS ❧

which admirably concealed a slight tendency to waver, collected his loose gold into a pile, then, slipping the greater part into his pocket, slammed down in front of the ever more bewildered youth five ringing golden pieces.

"There, young man!" quoth he, "take these, and also take the coach to-morrow back to London. Eat humble-pie when you get there. And for the future, sir, beware of wine and the company of your superiors, of fashionable captains, and the Bath road. Reserve yourself for the Harmonious Bones and the ale tankards. Not a word, sir!"

Upon which he pointed to the door with so decided a gesture that, not unlike the cur to which he had been compared, the would-be Macaroni crawled away without either the wit or the courage to utter another word.

Had he been able to see through the solid wood, after he had drawn it between himself and his singular entertainer, Mr. Huggins probably would have been more puzzled than ever. For Denis O'Hara, propped against the table, was swinging from side to side, a prey to paroxysms of laughter. O'Hara, moralist! Delicious pleasantry!

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

It was, after all, not before the sunset of the second day that Mr. O'Hara, on Red Beauty, rode into the rumour, the stir and smoke of Town, from the still and lonely, clean-breathing country road.

With his temporary sense of wealth there had come over him a temporary sense of caution. The going was bad after the snow; it was not in him to push the dear, faithful mare; and he was determined, moreover, to risk no encounter that might jeopardise his renewed hopes. It was late, therefore, before (in a toilet of sufficient elegance, his hair recoiffed *à la Catogan* to hide the loss of his curl) he found himself once again in Mayfair between the two link-extinguishers of Kitty Bellairs's house in Charles Street.

A sedan was waiting outside and there were lights within. He was emboldened to knock, and, to his bliss, was admitted, though upon conditions. "Mistress Bellairs was this very moment about to leave for Lady Wharton's rout," said the footman; "he would inquire whether she would receive."

"Nay," said Denis, his heart beating

❖ LITTLE RED HEELS ❖

thick, and slipped one of his hard-won guineas into the ready hand, "do not announce me, friend: I will see for myself."

He sprang up the stairs four at a time and then paused without the lavender parlour. And there he stood, the silly fellow, breathing short, trembling, before he could summon self-control enough to knock on the white-and-gold panel.

"Gracious sakes!" cried Kitty's treble within.

"'T is I, darling — Kitty, darling, 't is I!" cried the most ridiculous, hoarse voice in all the world.

"Who?" came the query, crystal-clear and silver-sharp within. (Bellairs Incomparable was musical even in querulousness; delicious in all her butterfly moods.)

"I really believe, ma'am," came Lydia's vibrant tone, with a bold giggle, "that 't is Mr. O'Hara back again, if you please!"

And, "O'Hara!" echoed the lady within. And surely, surely, there was a ring of joy in the cry!

And O'Hara, opening the door, heard the song of her silken skirt, the patter of her little red heels, as, surprised into unwary graciousness, she actually ran to meet her

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

faithful adorer — those saucy little red heels that had been sweetly dancing through his thoughts these five long days!

“Mercy!” cried the lady, “what have you done with your hair?”





IV

IT had been said of George Lionel Hill-Dare, Earl Mandeville, that he had never loved nor spared a woman. But that was before he met Rachel Peace—the young and lovely actress who, with her dove-like, Quaker ways and her passionate voice, had taken London's heart by storm.

Her, Mandeville both loved and spared, until the hour struck—inevitable hour—when he would spare no longer; and the pretty walls of her false paradise were shattered by the man who refused to remain content any longer with what so sweetly contented the woman. He demanded rather than begged that she should give up everything for him, offering her in exchange all a gentleman could offer—all, except his

[147]

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

name! Then the pride of Quaker purity (ingrained in every fibre of her being, despite her flagrant renunciation of her ancestors' tenets) flamed up in her against him with that new pride to which her apprenticeship to Art and work had given rise. She would surrender neither honour nor calling. And it was in bitter anger they had quarrelled and parted.

The parting to Rachel had been like the tearing asunder of her heart-strings. And when she heard rumours of the possible marriage of his lordship with the fabulously rich and beautiful widow, Mrs. Bellairs, she could endure it no longer, and took the first opportunity that offered to call him back to her side.

Indeed, she herself went in search of him, a doing the remembrance of which would have made her blush into her pillows at night till her dying day had it not been for succeeding events—consequences of her own act, which changed the whole current of her existence, and brought poor Rachel quickly beyond the province of her maidenly blushes.

For some fancied slight to her, Mandeville had challenged Mr. Stafford and in the



ensuing *recontre* he had been dangerously wounded. Then, woman-like, Rachel did what she had before refused with such scorn. She flew to his side, casting away all thought of name or fame. And when, after a rapid convalescence, he was ordered seclusion and quiet, she accompanied him to one of his country mansions. For, then, things were so with her that to leave him would have been worse than death.

It was full winter at Alston Wood. The world had set for storm, both within and without. Lord Mandeville was not of those who make life or love easy; and with the killing of those two prides of hers which Rachel Peace had sacrificed to him there had come upon her another sort of pride — shy, sensitive, ready to take alarm at a look or a shadow. And thus she had withdrawn to her rooms after a day of cross-purposes, and left him alone to spend his evening as best he might.

But alone Lord Mandeville did not intend to spend it.

Hitherto, out of consideration for her he had asked no guest inside his doors. But now, with characteristic disregard of the evil

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

weather, he had sent for his neighbour, Sir Everard Cheveral, of Bindon—as good company, for all his threescore years, as any man in England. The roads were clearly bad going, this night; the guest was evidently delayed, and the impatience of solitary waiting was soon irksome to the young man. There was a lordly anger upon him and a restless fire of mischief in his blood, born of his returning vigour and of the small scope that the quiet country life had offered lately to his teeming energy.

He sat in the library before the log-fire—a bumper of Burgundy at his elbow, a volume of Wycherley's plays at his feet, where it had slid from his knee.

As he gazed upon the leaping flames and heard the wind grumble round the house, scold and mutter in the chimney, he frowned as he recalled the recent quarrel with Rachel. Yet, even as he frowned, he smiled. He was wroth, in his masterful way, that she should have defied and eluded him (with a dignity that left him hopelessly in the wrong); and yet it was with a secret pleasure that he dwelt upon the memory of the way in which her slow-moving eyes had first burned with a passionate fire and then brimmed with the

tears that her pride refused to release; the way in which her tender lip had curved scorn and quivered reproach. This sensitive instrument was his, and he would play on it as he liked: draw from it harmony or discord, since all it brought forth was music to him.

But meanwhile he was alone, and impatient of loneliness. He began to pace the room, unbarred a shutter and looked into the night. All was black, save where the snow, already heaped against the window-ledge, dead white, caught the candle gleam. He threw a curse upon the skies and one upon Cheveral's ancient bones, then came back to add a log or two to the furious hearth.

Had it not been that the snowfall was so thick without as to muffle sight and sound, even from a little distance, his watching eyes and ears would have been even then rejoiced by the plod and thud of straining horses, the roll of coach-wheels and the slow progress of a bobbing lantern up the lime avenue.

But, presently, as he stood with his back to the fire, toasting his handsome calves, the hail of a human voice rose distinct above the clamouring wind. Mandeville started from

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

his musing ; a mischievous smile twisted his lips.

“ Poor old Cheveral,” he thought cynically, “ nothing but a due appreciation of Alston’s cellars (and a right sense of the honour of an invitation from my noble self) would have brought him from his own snug chimney-corner to-night ! ”

Then, as the call rose louder, closer and more insistent, his lordship, in a hospitable hurry, pealed his bell and stood in the hall, bustling the eager servants, before even the travellers without had reached the haven of the porch.

“ Most excellent Cheveral . . . ” he was beginning jovially, as the two folds of the great outer door wheeled noiselessly back under the ministration of a pair of brisk footmen ; but the words were cut short on his lips by sheer amazement. Instead of the tall, thin shape he had expected to see, there met his gaze something soft, round and fluffy, not unlike a human white bird puffed out with cold and petulance, that was poised but a second on his threshold and then fluttered in towards him, shaking snowy plumes.

A few crisp snowflakes flew like dove feathers in the air. Then this mass of white



fur, marabout, lace and wadded silk, resolved itself into a much wrapped up little lady.

"By the Lord Harry!" cried Mandeville, delighted. "Madam—your most devoted, most honoured——"

Again he broke off; from under thrust-back hood a small, round face had peeped out upon him, bright and rosy from the cold air—a pair of lustrous, dark eyes, a dimpling smile. But, even as he looked, the pretty smile directed towards him had become fixed in a dismay as sudden as his own.

"Mistress Bellairs!" he cried, with his dark frown.

"Lord Mandeville!" she ejaculated in a tone of primmest discontent.

The last person in very truth which either had desired to see! Mistress Bellairs had undoubtedly been placed by the nobleman in the incredible and almost odious position of being almost jilted—she who had hitherto reserved to herself an exclusive right in such transactions. As for Lord Mandeville, that this particular lady of the world—towards whom, indeed, his conscience was not altogether easy—his sister's chosen friend, the very impersonation, as it were, of the desirable social existence his friends desired for him;

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

that Mrs. Bellairs, in short, should find him in rural retreat, *en partie fine* with his poor Rachel . . . it seemed a piece of spite as evil as ever fate could show a gentleman! And he fiercely resented it. " 'Tis a trick of my dear family," was his next thought. And that brow of his that could lower to such purpose grew yet more thunder-black.

But there was no mistaking the genuineness of Mistress Kitty's own annoyance; she turned, a perfect whirlwind of fluff and fury, upon the two figures that had followed in her wake.

The first was a bemuffled damsel with "Confidential Maid" proclaimed in every step of her pert advance and in every fold of her smart attire. Her pretty little nose was pinched with the cold, her sharp eyes roved with squirrel-like curiosity from side to side. She laid on her mistress's cloak a possessive hand, that was, however, sharply thrust on one side, while the lady poured the vials of her wrath upon the third traveller. This was a tall man, who stood stamping his great riding boots free of the snow, beating his numbed hands against his sides, and cursing the cold in a brogue so genial as to rob his language of all indecorum.

"Mr. O'Hara," said Mrs. Bellairs, "how could you, how *dared* you, bring me to this house?"

"Why, Kitty darling?" cried the startled gentleman.

"Sir!"

"Madam, I should say. Sure, the word keeps slipping out, my jewel. Why, whose house is it at all?"

"A house, sir," cried Kitty, stamping her foot in her turn, "where I will not be insulted by stopping another instant!"

The great doors had been closed behind the speakers during this brief dialogue, and an agreeable warmth was beginning to steal through their benumbed limbs. Nevertheless, Mr. O'Hara responded with the greatest alacrity:

"Insulted, is it? Why, then, that's easily remedied. Open the door again, you fellows; the lady's going back into her coach!"

Upon his gesture the lackeys once more flung the doors wide, and a whistling blast rushed eddying into the hall, bearing the ice of death upon its wings. Mr. O'Hara extended his becufted wrist with a fine air of breeding.

"And if we are lost in the black snow

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

together," said he radiantly, "it's not I that will complain!"

Mrs. Bellairs cast but one look at the gulf without, where the bleak night was pointed with the cruel gleams of the falling snow. Then she shuddered.

"Lydia!" she moaned faintly, and demanded a chair—for a swoon was her immediate intention.

Her cavalier tipped the faintest suspicion of a wink to the host, who stood sardonically awaiting their decision, and that fastidious nobleman's heart was instantly won over to him for ever. His lordship waved his hand. "Let coach and cattle be taken round to the stables, the luggage brought in," he ordered.

The doors flew to once more. And Lord Mandeville, eager to secure so entertaining a companion as this Mr. O'Hara promised to be, without the concomitant awkwardness of his companion's society, addressed himself with great presence of mind to Mrs. Bellairs, whose damask cheek precluded any anxiety, even in the breast of the devoted Irishman, as to the condition of her heart's action.

"Madam," said he, "it is my grief that my presence here should be regarded by you as an insult. Nevertheless, it is my joy, and a

source of thankfulness, that my house should afford you shelter from the storm. Pray allow me to induce you to make use of the one, while avoiding the other. A suite of rooms will be prepared for you; and, I assure you, you shall receive every attention without being exposed to meet the object of your displeasure. Let the housekeeper be called."

Mistress Kitty disengaged herself from her attendant's perfunctory support, and, opening fabulous eyelashes, vouchsafed upon the speaker the glimmer of a most insolent eye.

"The housekeeper ——" she murmured. "Heaven grant a respectable person." And forthwith deemed it safest to relapse into fresh symptoms of syncope.

Lord Mandeville gave a short laugh like a snort. "Little cat!" thought he. "Mercy! but what an escape I've had!"

In a very little while the fair traveller, leaning upon the arm of her maid, was consigned over to the charge of an apple-blossom-faced, white-curled old lady, the innocent serenity of whose expression bore a finer witness to respectability than could the sourest prudery. To look at Mrs. Comfort's countenance and

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

yet refuse belief in the candour of her soul was sheer impossibility. Kitty Bellairs went, lamb-like, in her wake to "the saffron chamber," cheered by her host's parting promise of a cup of Mrs. Comfort's own apple-posset before that supper which was to be served to her anon—in state and privacy. The last assurance, by the way, delivered with the air of superfine civility, fell something less than agreeably on the lady's ear: such is the inconsequence of "little cats!"

Left to themselves, the two gentlemen measured each other with a mutually appraising eye; then each, with approval in his mien, bowed to the other.

"I have not heard the name of my hospitable entertainer, but I could make a good guess, I'm thinking," said Mr. O'Hara, "Lord Mandeville?"

"No other, sir," said the peer. "I myself, I believe, have the honour of seeing Mr. O'Hara. Any relation to my Lord Viscount Kilcrouney?"

"His own son, no less!" responded the other jovially. "Sole heir of his House and Name, to the family debts, and the best cellar between Cork and Derry—and that will be drunk to the last bottle before the old boy



thinks of leaving this world for a better one . . . more power to him!"

"I am delighted," said Mandeville. And, in sooth, he looked it. The restless devil within him was rapidly becoming an unwontedly jovial one. He caught O'Hara by the arm and marched him into the warm library, with its fragrance of old books and burning wood.

"Faith, and I'm delighted too!" said Denis, wheeling round to the blaze. "Sure there's not another man in the Kingdom that has done me such a good turn as yourself!"

The earl raised his red eyebrows, unconsciously haughty. How had he done Mr. O'Hara a turn of any kind?

"Sure, by your inconceivable folly," said Denis. "Had n't you the offer of a king's morsel, my lord, and have n't you left it to ——"

"I trust, my good sir, to one so appreciative as yourself. But I need n't ask — 't is as good as a honeymoon journey. Lucky dog!" said his lordship with a lurch towards the Irishman as he stood dividing the heavy tails of his great coat.

"Lucky! You never made a greater mistake in your life. It's as much as she'll do as

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

to let me squeeze the tip of her little finger. And sure I dare n't even do that for fear of hurting the tender creature." O'Hara paused and flung a misgiving glance upon Lord Mandeville's countenance. "I'm thinking," he went on, "it's but little acquaintance you had with Mrs. Bellairs, after all."

"Very little," the other hastened to assure him. Tiger of jealousy as he could be himself, he was sharp enough now in his turn to read the lover's thought.

O'Hara flung himself into a big armchair, and stretched out each slim leg in its snow-sodden boot to the hearth's blaze. Steam was beginning to rise about him.

"If you think now she'd even let me sit beside her in the coach!" he resumed in a grumbling tone. "I've been riding by the window, in the devil's own weather, these two days. By the powers, but I thought this blessed night every minute would be our next! What with my poor chestnut going lame on me, out of contrariness, and our being in the ditch twice (I scored there, though, for had n't I the pulling of my little darling out of the snow?); and what with her squealing at me through the window, and asking me where we were, and me not



knowing a foot, barring that it was the top of the winter with us and the middle of supper-time, and the post-boys bawling hellfire — though even that could n't warm a bone of us . . . I'll tell you, my lord, when I saw those lamps of yours gleaming out through the storm each side of your gates, it was as good as an angel's beacon. Faith, and that was the comical part of it, too! — for the gates were flung open for us before I'd time to let a yell, as if we had been expected."

"I am expecting a friend to-night," interpolated Lord Mandeville.

"Well, I could conceive a worse death for a man," pursued Mr. O'Hara reflectively, "than to fall asleep in the snow, with his arm around Kitty Bellairs — though she'd have scratched my eyes out first, most likely, and as long as she'd a bit of breath left would have vowed it was my fault entirely. Nothing would serve her, you see, but to Bath she must return, after — after ——" O'Hara paused and sought for an elegant expression — "after your lordship's display of aberration, as I said, and that last little affair of delicacy with Tom Stafford. She could n't find her pleasure in town at all. And, of

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

course, I had to go too; for there are too many gentlemen of the road, on the way, favoured by these dark nights — as anyone would know."

He flung open his coat as he spoke, and carelessly relieved himself of a brace of pistols, which he handled one after the other in so knowing a manner that Lord Mandeville, whose eyes rested upon him with amusement, broke out into his odd laugh. "I vow," he cried, "anyone might take you for 'the Captain' himself, Mr. O'Hara."

A singular little stillness fell over the Irishman at these words, and his dancing eye gazed suddenly into vacancy. Then, after an appreciable pause, he echoed Mandeville's laugh with a slow, spectral note.

"By the Lord Harry!" said the latter to himself, "this is even better than I thought. When we get some Burgundy into him, there will be rare fun. I almost wish I had left old Cheveral in peace." Aloud he cried to his guest that he must change his wet garments, and then they would make a night of it.

But, as Lord Mandeville and Mr. O'Hara sat once more before the kindly logs, with the generous bottle between them, in utmost



good fellowship, it was not of lawless deeds on heath and crossways that the mercurial visitor's wine-loosened tongue was disposed to wag, but rather upon the superlative attraction of his chosen fair. At the first bumper he was gently dithyrambic; at the second, enthusiastic; at the third, positively defiant.

"By my soul," he declared, "I'm amazed at you! I am, indeed, my lord. Why, now, d'ye mean to tell me you ever met anyone with a little pair of hands like hers?"

"Too plump and dimpled to my taste," quoth the Earl, languidly, from the depths of his leather cushions. He was imbibing quite as steadily as his companion, but the current of his blood was of the kind that runs deep without noise, and not to foam and bubble. "Little bits of dough! I like to feel the nerve in a woman's hands."

"Dough!" ejaculated O'Hara. "Dough, her hands? Ah, then I pity you! It's because you never got the sight of that little foot of hers. Oh," he went on, rolling maudlin eyes to the ceiling, "in a pink silk stocking you could n't help thanking Heaven for it, even if it trod on your heart."

Lord Mandeville slowly tilted his glass

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

from side to side to let the ruby catch the blaze and feast his eyes before he feasted his palate.

"It was clad in cherry colour when I was gratified with that spectacle," said he then, and proceeded, between reflective gulps: "Something of a want of taste in those stockings, with their splashing clocks! If I remember rightly, that's what finally decided me. Dumpy, my good sir, dumpy! Now, I have in my mind's eye a slender arch, all breeding, like the neck of a racehorse."

"Dumpy, my lord . . . !"

O'Hara set his glass with a smack on the table and turned a fierce glance upon the speaker. To prate of a want of taste, forsooth! Why, blood had been shed for less than so flagrant an instance of it than Lord Mandeville had just displayed himself. But, fortunately, recollecting that to this same defect in his host he himself owed his present hopeful position in Kitty's retinue, Mr. O'Hara found his ferocity suddenly merging into tenderness.

"Sure, glory be to God," he cried. "He knew what He was doing when He made you that way! He had *me* in His Eye. Why, murther, man, talk of arches? I, for



one, could never get beyond my Kitty's smile. That's arch enough for you, and to spare. With those doaty little teeth—it's too regular they are—and the dimple to beat all! Tare and ages! It's all up with me when she sets that dimple!"

He grasped the decanter, poured out a fresh bumper, held it solemnly aloft:

"To Kitty Bellairs!" he cried. "The fairest lady that ever stepped this earth. The angel of my thoughts. To Kitty Bellairs—the smallest hand and foot in the land, the roundest waist, and the most distracting dimple! Won't you drink, my lord?"

Lord Mandeville hoisted himself erect in the lazy depth of his chair, filled himself likewise a fresh beaker with white, languid hands; then he, too, raised his glass and looked long and steadfastly at the Irishman. The red gleam was in his auburn eyes. He was in that frame of mind when a man will not be content with the usual routine of life, when the fire in his veins demands some relief in extraordinary action. If to danger, so much the better!

As for O'Hara, with every nerve in him tingling in the reaction after the cold, he was

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

in that most delightful condition possible to the Celtic race — best described, in his own words, as spoiling for a fight.

“A toast, so be it!” said Lord Mandeville at last, dropping back into that cold insolence of manner which he had so far doffed in his intercourse with his unexpected guest. “A toast, then; I drink to her, before whom all other women are dowds and sluts. To the tall, white lily, to my girl, one kind shy look of whose gentle eyes is worth all the favours of ready widows. Won’t you drink, Mr. O’Hara?”

Both men rose to their feet, and each with a hand on his glass stood glaring at the other, like a challenging dog—dancing blue eyes fixed on lurid brown ones. Upon this tense silence, this breathless pause of preparation, in which, between the gusts of wind without, the very ticking of Mandeville’s great watch and the soft sighing collapse of the wood ash under the red logs could be heard, the door was flung open and the footman announced:

“Sir Everard Cheveral, my lord.”

For yet an appreciable space of time neither man would be the first to shift his defiant gaze; a space of time long enough



for that connoisseur of life, Sir Everard, to take in the situation. Then with his short note of laughter, which seemed always so much more expressive of mockery than of mirth, Lord Mandeville removed his fingers from his glass stem and turned to greet his guest.

"By the Lord Harry!" cried he, "but this is vastly good of you Sir Everard!"

Yet even while he shook hands he was rolling back a red eye, like a sullen dog's, towards O'Hara. The latter with his thumbs now thrust in the pockets of his embroidered waistcoat, stood all gay impatience for the fun to begin again, his slim feet sketching a jig step that may have been the last expression of the war-dance of some savage ancestor.

"Pray, my dear lord," said Sir Everard, while his thin chiselled lips curved into a slight smile, "have I interrupted? I understood by your note your lordship was alone. And now it seems as if I came a bad third."

"Then, faith," called Denis O'Hara, "You're like to be made into a good second in a minute!"

Again Lord Mandeville laughed. His unbidden visitor's humour liked him vastly.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Under their high-set brows the new comer's keen light eyes looked curiously from one to the other. This gentleman was an old beau of the most exquisite order, subjecting his elegance to his years with unerring taste. An antique cameo on his finger; rare Mechlin falling over the attenuated wrist; a fragrance of scented powder about the still plentiful, but silvering hair; a harmony of delicate sober colouring round the lean figure, held erect now, with somewhat conscious effort, by him who had once been known as "young Adonis" — his personality was one which could not fail to create an immediate impression. United as it was to an imperturbable judiciousness and a sly wit, it gave him authority as well as popularity in those high circles which his fastidiousness allowed him alone to frequent.

"A second!" said he. "Fie, fie, I hope not — I trust not. My friend, Lord Mandeville, is the last man I know to have scandal under his roof-tree. Your guest is pleased to be waggish, Mandeville. A relative, perhaps? Will you not present me?"

"No relative," said the master of the house, who, with all that singularity of demeanour which led him to be regarded as an



eccentric, had nevertheless a pretty close regard for such ceremony as he deemed becoming to his rank, and could be very *grand seigneur* when he chose. "No relative, Sir Everard, but a traveller whom the storm has thrown into the first harbour on his road, and whom I feel most honoured in being privileged to entertain — Mr. O'Hara, eldest son of Lord Kilcronev."

"Indeed, indeed," quoth Sir Everard, each ejaculation marked by a bow, and these most subtly measured to the courtesy rank of the recipient. "I have had the favour of the acquaintance of my Lord Kilcronev — in his day."

"And a divil of a day it was, sir," said the irrepressible Denis, pulling out the lining of his waistcoat pockets, and then slapping them to emphasise their emptiness.

"But there is certainly a resemblance between you and my Lord Mandeville, hence my mistake," said the old Baronet, decorously ignoring the filial expression of feeling.

"A kind of kinship in the colour of the hair," responded O'Hara. "The same lovely auburn, sir, especially my own. And I was just beginning to find out an interesting similarity of the colours of our tempers

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

when your agreeable presence was announced."

Thus the Honourable Denis, neatly endeavouring to bring back things to their previous footing. But Lord Mandeville flung back his head and laughed again. And in this third outburst there was something so genial and appreciative that the Irishman heard in it with regret the death knell of his pretty quarrel. "As pretty a quarrel," he said mournfully to himself, "as ever I saw on the brew."

And sure enough his lordship's next words were those of conciliation:

"The presence of my excellent friend, Sir Everard, is always beneficial," quoth he, "but never was more opportune than to-night. Come over to the fire, Cheveral, and discuss that Burgundy while we wait for supper. Mr. O'Hara and I were about to drink a toast — or, rather, to be quite accurate, I was endeavouring to persuade Mr. O'Hara to drink mine, while he very properly thought I should drink his."

"Indeed," said the old gentleman, sinking gratefully into his chair and extending his fine old hand, with its little tremble, for the beaker Mandeville was hospitably filling.



He knew as much now of what had taken place as if he had been present at the whole scene. "But why not each drink to his own . . . lady and let me drink to both?"

"Well, you see," said O'Hara insinuatingly, a lingering hope beginning to sparkle in his eye, "we had just a trifle of difference about which is best worth the bumper."

"He likes the *rose pompon*, and I love the tall lily," put in Mandeville; and he flung a half mocking look on O'Hara, as who should say: "No use, my friend, it takes two to make a quarrel." "And so," he continued, "as Sir Everard wisely says, let us agree each to flavour his cup with the flower he finds most fragrant; while he, old *roué* as he is, combines the bouquet!"

"To Kitty, the Queen of them all!" cried O'Hara, drowning his last flare of defiance in a draught so cool, so rich, so subtly strong, that it had been worthy to toast Aphrodite herself.

"To Rachel, the one woman for me," said Lord Mandeville in a quiet voice, and drank likewise.

The older man watched a second with an amusement half cynical, half melancholy.

"To the two most lovely ladies," he said

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

then, and uplifted his glass. After a few sips, however, he put it down.

But the young men emptied their cups without a pause, as if the draught had been love itself, and drew a long breath. Then cried O'Hara boisterously, as the liquor tingled through his veins:

"What, Sir Everard, shirking already — and with such a spur to the drink!"

"Why, sir, no. Yet 't were sin," said the epicure, "to pull at such nectar as a horse at a trough. Gentlemen, gentlemen, you should let it lie on the tongue, and *think* as it slides down. Why, my good sirs, there's sunshine in that juice. The very sunshine and breeze of France. Aye, aye, and the spirit of lost youth!"

He gazed at the purple in his glass and let his fingers play round the rim; then he raised it aloft once more.

"Old age has few joys," said he, "and therefore is a miser to them — I linger, my dear young friends, over the pleasure that is already gone from you. And now I can still drink to those two lovely ones, whose faces and forms this precious liquid helps me to picture, though it is unlikely these ancient eyes shall ever behold them."

[172]



"Miser indeed," exclaimed Lord Mandeville, "and poor philosophy, good sir! For we can down with another brimmer while you stint with the first."

And suiting the action to the word, he refilled O'Hara's glass and his own.

"Hooroosh!" cried the Irishman, and the first ceremony was repeated, if possible, with increased zest.

It was fortunate that Earl Mandeville was noted for his strong head in this hard drinking age. As for Lord Kilcrouney's heir, his life was spent in such constant state of exhilaration of one kind or another that, while his friends declared he was rarely drunk, his enemies vowed he never was sober. Nevertheless, it must be owned that after this last libation neither of the gallant lovers was quite in possession of his usual deliberateness of judgment.

Upon Sir Everard's rather plaintive dedication, O'Hara cried exuberantly:

"Sure, the darlings are in the house this minute and it would be a poor case if you don't get a sight of them both to-morrow!" And his imprudent remark was instantly capped by Mandeville's cool suggestion:

"To-morrow? Why not to-night?"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

At this, however, even O'Hara stared a second and hesitated. He did not think anything would lure his Kitty in dudgeon from her virtuous retreat. But the red glow had returned to Mandeville's eye and was burning steadily.

"By the Lord Harry," he cried, "we are a pair of dullards, recreant knights!"

"Idjits," suggested O'Hara, suddenly catching fire without as yet, any clear notion of his host's trend.

"And Cheveral here — old lady killer as he is still — would have a right to walk in and cut us out," pursued Mandeville. "What! our two pretty birds each moping in its cage upstairs and we proposing to sup below without them! We'll have them down."

"The rose and the lily to grace the table," interrupted Cheveral, whose clear, moderated tones were in contrast to the feverish utterances of the other two. "Unfortunately, if my experience goes for anything, the bloom of these flowers sometimes suffers from ——"

But Mandeville cut in, in hot pursuit of his mad idea: "And Cheveral, first connoisseur in Europe, shall play the Paris and bestow the apple."



"Faith, and I've no fear," ejaculated O'Hara with a grimace. "If only I can coax my little Venus to come for judgment."

"Then," answered the Earl, "if she does not, you will be voted vanquished, my friend, and have to drink my toast. The lover whose lady refuses his summons is shown a fool. There's the challenge, sir."

"It never shall be said that Denis O'Hara refused a challenge, be it cup, kiss, or sword!"

"A moment ago, young men," said Sir Everard, lifting his ivory hand with a little rebuking gesture, "I found myself envying your youth. But, 'pon my soul, I begin to think old age has its compensations; at least it will feel less foolish when it wakes up in the morning, I'll warrant."

"You'll be envying my youth again, in a short while," retorted Mandeville brutally, as he flung himself in the chair before the escritoire and plunged a long-feathered quill into the ink.

"A letter!" cried O'Hara. "By jabers, a letter! By the powers, that's a mighty fine idea!"

He stood on the hearth-rug with his head on one side, nibbling his little finger. All at once he smiled blandly, struck his forehead,

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

and cut one of his eccentric capers. Then, stepping gaily on his toe, as if in the opening measure of a minuet, he advanced towards his host.

"After you, my lord," said he, "with that pen . . . Oh, take your time — only be as quick as you can!"

Lord Mandeville glanced up, with a twitch of lip and eyebrow that gave him a curious resemblance to a snarling hound. Then he dashed the pen down on the velvet cloth and folded the sheet. His letter of summons to Rachel Peace seemed by no means so difficult as O'Hara's proposed epistle to Mrs. Bellairs. Yet, if O'Hara wrote slowly and often paused for reflection, the delighted smiles that succeeded each other on his ingenuous countenance bore witness to self-approval.

Kitty, darling, that red-headed fox of a fellow, Mandeville, has got some notion into his poll (and it's half Burgundy) to ask you down to supper with us to-night. I know it's not you that would be accepting such an invitation from the likes of him — but this is to warn you, Kitty, darling. If you love me you'll say nay, of course. I would not have you come down to be stared at, if it was for the King himself.



As Mr. O'Hara read over this lucubration, with an even broader grin, Lord Mandeville, measuring the hearth-rug from end to end with impatient step, briefly inquired if he were ready, and hardly waited for the answer to ring the bell.

"Have this letter conveyed to Mistress Peace," he ordered.

"Convey this note to Mistress Bellairs, and you'll mightily oblige me," said O'Hara insinuatingly, his dulcet tone contrasting with Lord Mandeville's peremptoriness. "And by the way," he added, "John, my son, Thomas, James, or whatever your god-parents called you, you might inform Mistress Bellairs that his lordship begs she will honour him at supper to-night. Just a little formality," he added, turning to answer Mandeville's inquiring stare.

The latter shrugged his shoulders; he seemed suddenly to have lost his jovial humour.

Sir Everard Cheveral sighed a little, then philosophically finished his glass of Burgundy by slow sips.

Lord Mandeville was one of those masters who are always well-served, and who, if they

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

are more feared than loved by their servants, are more admired even for their eccentricities than others would be for their virtues. The few orders he had given that evening had been carried out with such zest that both his guests halted with surprise and admiration before the sight of the gaily illuminated dining-room, the flash of the silver, the rarity of the greenhouse blooms.

"We will not sit," said Lord Mandeville, "till the ladies appear." Then turning on the major-domo—"Inform the ladies," he ordered, "that we await them here."

There followed an anxious pause. Half weary, half entertained, Sir Everard Cheveral, who had long ceased to be able to take much interest in his own affairs, and was therefore dependent upon those of others for most of the zest of life, leaned against the mantelpiece and waited, placidly enough. Whichever way expectation terminated, it was sure to prove dramatic to the observer.

But O'Hara, for all that he had been so smiling a scribe, was nervous. His frame of mind betrayed itself in aimless jokes, restless, interrupted gestures. He was now sitting, now standing, now feigning with pointed finger a fencing pass at the waistcoat of



some pictured Mandeville ancestor, now appraising a particularly wooden-eyed ancestress and shaking his head in rueful criticism. Mandeville himself had taken his post near the door and, with head bent forward, hands clasped behind his back and legs wide apart, stood listening, his brow growing ever blacker as the expected sounds delayed their approach.

At last there was a stir among the attendants without, and a rustle of trailing silks. Mandeville raised his head sharply. The young men looked at each other, once more exchanging glances of defiance. Then the two folds of the door were flung open, and, as in a frame — bepowdered, bepatched, bejewelled, with little head high held, conscious of its own incomparable daintiness; in her low-bosomed gown of pearl satin à *ramages de roses*; diamonds flashing on cobweb laces with each breath of the triumphant yet fluttered breast, flashes repeated by those teeth O'Hara had lauded, and by those eyes, languorous yet brilliant, that might have filched an Emperor's crown — stood Kitty! As fair an apparition, certes, as had ever graced the old manor-house.

"Mistress Bellairs," said the butler solemnly into the charged silence.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Damn me!" cried Sir Everard to himself, startled from his nonchalance. "As Mandeville prophesied, this is like to make a man regret his youth."

O'Hara clapped his hands together with a wild shout of exultation. "Venus herself!" Then, suddenly, he lifted his finger as if in anger. "Ah, Kitty, Kitty, this is a pretty trick!" But he could not for the life of him keep the wild delight from eye or toe.

Shooting one fierce look back at the two other men, Lord Mandeville advanced, with his *grand air*, took Kitty's little hand, and first bent over it with some phrase of high-flown, if somewhat superficial, gratitude; then he formally presented Sir Everard Cheveral, who had advanced to his elbow. After this ceremony, while Kitty beamed on the new admirer, whose reputation was not unknown to her, the host stood in the door-way, watching the empty passage in that sort of patience which is so much more dangerous than any outburst of passion.

In spite of the flutter of triumph in which she had made her *entrée*, Kitty carried nevertheless a certain delicate shyness about her to-night, which robbed her position of anything over-bold and rendered her quite



adorable in O'Hara's eyes. So that, forgetting his victory, he stood contemplating her with fatuous eyes while she responded with her prettiest grace to Sir Everard's old-fashioned courting.

The butler, who had been uneasily watching his master, now approached him with much discretion and some mystery.

"May it please your lordship," he murmured, "Mistress Peace begs to be excused."

Lord Mandeville went livid and then crimson, the veins on his neck and brow starting like whipcords.

"My tablets!" he said; and, when they were brought, wrote a line. "Give this with your own hands to Mistress Peace."

The old servant, as he hurried away, shook his head several times over the folded note: he knew his master well, knew all the signs of coming storm in that stormy personality. "'T will be as bad a one as ever we have seen," thought he. And, in some manly corner of his soul untouched by servitude, he pitied the poor soft-voiced young lady.

"And now," cried Lord Mandeville, "we'll to the table!"

"Aha!" cried O'Hara.

But the other went on with a look that cut

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

short the Irishman's cheer as effectually as if he had struck him on the mouth: "I expect another fair guest. But ladies like to make the men wait and languish. And, by the Lord Harry, we'll not accept the situation to-night! Mistress Bellairs, will you honour me by taking the seat at my right hand?"

"Faith," whispered O'Hara to Cheveral, as he neatly skipped into the seat on the further side of Kitty, "his lordship's smile is enough to turn everything sour in the house this blessed moment! But I'll have the toast out of him all the same."

Sir Everard glanced across the table at his host's face, deadly white once more, and shook his head much as the old butler had done. There was a hint of something almost tragic in the air, which made him fear that the evening might not end with the mere out-pouring of wine. He glanced compassionately at handsome reckless O'Hara, and saw him in his mind's eye at the point of Mandeville's furious blade; and he almost put up a warning hand as the Irishman now made a loud demand upon the Earl's attention.

"Never put off your best intentions, my lord," O'Hara cried. "There's that little



ceremony we were discussing a while ago, just clamouring to be gone through (and in as pretty a voice as ever sat by your side at this table, or at any other) and I challenge you to prove the contrary!"

"Your metaphors are a trifle mixed," answered Lord Mandeville with a sneer. "But without troubling about your grammar, sir, I would point out that, in England at least, toasts are not drunk at table before bread is broken."

Mistress Kitty shifted her bird-like glance from her host to the vacant chair on his left. An intuition of what had taken place had already begun to dawn in her quick brain. And to her, who in all the world dreaded nothing so much as dulness, who had seized with avidity the first chance of escape from the solitude of her chamber—a solitude which her own temper had imposed upon her—came the conclusion that the night would be entertaining.

"Let him whose summons is not obeyed be shown a—'hem, hem!" persisted Mr. O'Hara in a high sing-song, leaning back in his chair, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"The very devil's in the boy!" said Sir Everard testily to himself.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

Lord Mandeville, who was bending forward, both his hands on the table, in no reassuring attitude, here suddenly started and turned his gaze sharply towards the door.

Without pompous announcement of servant, without self-assertive tap of heel, or rustle of gown, Rachel Peace entered upon them.

Lord Mandeville leaped to his feet, took a few hasty steps towards her, and then abruptly halted. Sir Everard, with the stiff and slow movement of old age, rose likewise, fumbling for the ribbon of his glasses. O'Hara sat as if transfixed, a succession of emotions sweeping over his countenance — amazement, admiration, vexation, and then a deep compassion.

Mistress Bellairs remained likewise motionless, opening wide eyes and pinching a small mouth, waiting for her opportunity. She had been quite prepared for this meeting, for the whereabouts of so celebrated a favourite as Rachel Peace had naturally been the talk of the town.

"I have come as you bade me," said Rachel, in a low, toneless voice.

And Lord Mandeville stood staring at her

and could find no word with which to receive her. In his first letter he had thus commanded: "Love, I have guests to supper. Come down. Be beautiful. Wear your pearls and the grey gown I like." So wrote he, condescendingly, expressing his lordly will. The next summons had run in fewer words still: "Rachel, I am waiting."

Now, obedient, she stood before him, the soft folds of shimmering grey trailing about her, the ropes of pearls round her white throat. But above this delicate splendour, her face was so marble-white, her sweet eyes so dark with pain, her tender lips folded close upon such sorrow; and withal she stood in such beauty, such dignity, that Mandeville's wild humour fell from him and he stood abashed.

"My lord," said Sir Everard gravely, "will you not introduce me to the lady?"

And, at that, O'Hara got up and drew near them also; and Kitty sat, her brilliant head alertly poised, knowing that her moment was coming. For a perceptible instant, Lord Mandeville hesitated. Suddenly, as if a gulf had opened before him, he saw into what a pitfall his arrogant wildness had brought the woman he loved.



INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

And that little pause was as a dagger struck into Rachel's heart—culminating misery of this hour of misery, final awakening from her impossible dream of happiness!

"Of course, Sir Everard . . . My dear," began Lord Mandeville, pulling himself together, and endeavouring to speak lightly, with white dry lips.

But she interrupted him, in the golden voice that in her brief career had charmed fame to her, and that now in its very steadiness and sweetness rang somehow with a deeper pathos than if it had been broken with tears:

"Useless this, my lord. I am now of those with whom ceremony is out of place, and you have made me feel it to-night." She turned slowly to the strangers. "Sirs, I am Rachel Peace, who, poor actress as she was, when you may have heard of her first, had then at least a right to all men's respect. To-night she stands before you in satins and jewels, and sees ——" —her voice faltered, and the blood rushed to her face—"has been made to see at last what she has become . . . Madam, I am aware that my presence in your company must be regarded by you as an insult."



Now, these very words had been hovering on the little widow's lips, and she had been merely waiting for the right moment to place them herself. But no sooner was she thus addressed by her enemy than she started and looked at her with new eyes; saw on a sudden how young the creature was, how forlorn, how unprotected, how sad and innocent her gaze and pathetic her voice. Then all Kitty's womanly heart melted within her, and the tears rose. Her face worked with the prettiest grimace in the world.

"Rachel—Rachel, my girl!" exclaimed Lord Mandeville.

O'Hara and Cheveral had fallen back. Worlds would they have given to be able to efface themselves from the scene. Deep especially was O'Hara's manly shame for his own careless share in it.

"Oh, my lord," said Rachel Peace, turning her slow eyes on Mandeville, "and you had pledged me your protection!"

Between the fumes of the wine and the shock of realising suddenly all the baseness into which he had drifted under its influence, the man reeled. He caught for support at the table behind him. Then Rachel Peace unclasped the pearls from her pretty white

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

throat, from her slender wrists, and laid them beside him as he stood staring upon her. "Chains of my shame!" she said. And, at that, Mistress Kitty sprang from the table, and ran and caught her in her warm arms and kissed her and cried over her as over a hurt child.

"Come away, poor, poor thing!" said she, "away with me!" And Rachel, all her high courage gone at this unexpected touch of human kinship, was led away in her rival's embrace, half fainting, unresisting, to the door.

On the threshold, Mistress Bellairs paused to cast, first upon Lord Mandeville, and then upon O'Hara, such a fulminating look of wrath and scorn that each man, struck according to his different nature, dropped his eyes before it.

"I hope you are proud of your night's work, *gentlemen*!"

"Now, by ——," cried Mandeville as the door closed, and made a spring. But Sir Everard laid a heavy hand upon his arm.

"Let them be, my lord," he almost ordered.

The young man glared upon him, then suddenly turned away to fling himself in



the armchair by the fireside, with his back towards them, his face hidden in his hands. Sir Everard Cheveral returned to his own seat at the table; but, with all the philosophy of his ripe years, he could not find it in him to continue his supper. And, pushing his plate from him, he merely broke a crust between his fingers and finished his glass of wine in meditative silence.

He had anticipated a tragedy — the shedding, probably, of some of this riotous youthful blood — as the inevitable end of the evening's work. But the silent tragedy of this broken woman's life he had not anticipated. And it had moved him more than his egotistical old age was prepared to endure. It was, therefore, a most severe eye that he turned upon O'Hara, when, after a lengthy pause, that mercurial gentleman sidled back to his place.

Denis's face was quivering with complex emotion. He was bursting with the necessity of unburdening himself of some of it.

"'Pon my soul," said he, in a whisper so exquisitely irritating to Cheveral at such a moment that nothing could have made him submit to it but the knowledge that if he refused his ear, Mr. O'Hara would inevitably

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

seek that of Lord Mandeville, " 'Pon my soul, sir, Mandeville was not so far wrong: she's a lovely creature, sir, a lovely creature!"

"Lord Mandeville was deeply wrong," answered Sir Everard, drawing back a little to rest his glance in yet fuller rebuke upon the speaker.

"Oh, as to that," said O'Hara ruefully, driving his hand through his red, unpowdered hair, "we were both wrong — a pair of brutes, sir! But, sure, it was not us at all but a trick of the Burgundy. 'Tis a powerful treacherous wine, that same, and you never know where it will have you. But, whisper now," momentary remorse overcome by a fresh exuberance of lover's pride. "Wasn't I right? Did you ever see anything so lovely as my darling little Kitty? Don't I wish she were my darling! Look here now, if she was n't to have her toast after all — just between ourselves, sir, without disturbing that poor fellow yonder — it would break my heart, it would be the last drop —"

The old gentleman's severity of aspect became mollified. He was not proof against the charm of O'Hara's handsome, gallant personality, his wheedling ways, his transparent simplicity of heart.



"If, indeed, you will make it the last drop to-night, sir," said he, with a smile at his own conceit, "I have no objection to joining in your toast. I will drink to Mrs. Bellairs, but not so much to the loveliness of her person, which is very great, but to the loveliness of her heart."

He spoke in a low voice, so as not to reach the ear of the brooding man by the fire. But became even more emphatic as he continued:

"I will own to you, sir, that when I saw Miss Rachel Peace standing before us in her soft robes and milky pearls, with all the sorrow of the world in her beautiful eyes, I thought indeed that the lily far surpassed the rose. But when Mistress Bellairs ran forward in her womanly pity I thought, sir, I thought ——" He did not finish the phrase, but there came a mist over his keen eye. And raising his glass, with that slight tremble of the hand, he drank a silent toast.

Mistress Kitty vowed next morning that nothing would induce her to remain an hour longer under "that man's roof." And after a stormy interview with Mr. O'Hara, in which the latter was rated, threatened with ever-

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

lasting displeasure and thereupon forgiven, the little lady and Lydia made unheard-of exertion and were ready close upon noon, having only kept the coach an hour waiting in the snow.

Her host stood in the hall as she passed through. His brow was black, his mouth set like steel. He made her a low bow, without attempting to address her; which politeness, with her little chin high in the air, she returned with a sweeping curtsy. He watched the departure with the same suspicious eye.

"Sure," whispered O'Hara, upon her other side, "he's half mad. He's been the whole morning pleading at that poor girl's door, but she'll give him no sign of life, and I vow he's afraid that we'll be lifting her away with us."

"So vastly probable," said Mistress Kitty, with some asperity, as she stepped into her travelling chariot.

It was a still day after the night's storm, and a sky of palest blue beautifully envaulted the white earth. With hardly a sound over the thick-lying snow they drove down the great lime avenue — in summer a humming



haunt of shade and sweetness, now, with its great black trunks and giant nests of bare twigs, looking as bleak and melancholy under the white layers as a loveless old age.

Mistress Kitty, after snuffing out several cheerful remarks of her Abigail, sat in unwontedly reflective mood. And, ever and anon, she peered through the window at O'Hara's gallant figure on the dancing bay (provided for him out of his lordship's stables, to replace his own lamed mare) a mount which he sat as might the unsurpassable Mr. Angelo himself.

"After all it is something to have the devotion of one who carries so true a heart for the woman he loves," was her caressing thought.

As they reached the lodge gates, a muffled figure darted out from the porch into the road and waved a hand imploringly. O'Hara, recognising the face under the hood, called to the coachman to stop. Then he drew back, and Rachel Peace ran to the coach's side and tapped at the glass. Her fair face bore the mark of a bitter night-watch and of many tears.

"For God's sake," she cried, as Mistress Bellairs quickly lowered the window, "for

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

God's sake take me with you away from here! I have friends in Bath, I will not trouble you long. Oh, as you are a woman and a true one, take me! I have slipped out before the dawn, and he believes me still in my room. If I see him again I am lost — more lost than ever," said Rachel with a sob.

Miss Lydia sniffed with a mighty significance, at which her mistress withered her with a glance.

"Come in, my dear, come in!" cried Kitty Bellaïrs, and held out her little warm hands to poor Rachel Peace.





V

“ **A** COLD night, sir, and a dark.”
“ You say truly, landlord ! ”

It was a young voice — so much so, indeed, as to be still occasionally wandering in the debateable land between boy’s treble and man’s bass — and, as the traveller stepped from cold and the black night into the light and warmth of the inn, he displayed a face and form to match.

Master Lawrence, host of “the Bear,” Devizes (famed for the genteelest rooms, the softest beds, and the best “library” between London and Bath) ran his eye knowingly over his guest. Experience had taught him to classify at a glance: Here was the young gentleman of fortune upon his first independent travels, type of wayfarer not the least welcome to the landlord’s heart. Very

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

young, this one, innocent yet of the grand tour. And wealthy! Sables to his *roquelaure* that would make a lady's eye glisten, watches, ruffle-brooches — all new. In mourning, too. No doubt his own master.

Mine host rubbed his hands.

"Bedroom, sir? I can fortunately still give you our best set — vacated only this morning by Sir Jasper Standish — with room for your valet, next door; and supper in half-an-hour. I trust your lordship has not been stopped this dark night?"

"Stopped?"

"Aye, there are again some of the snaffling gentry between here and Reading —"

"Snaffling gentry . . . ? Oho!" cried the young gentleman and tried to look knowing, but his eyes were round and vague.

"But your lordship's come to the right house; no fear of information leaking from 'the Bear,' my lord."

"I am no lord," said the boy, whose peach-like cheek had turned of a deeper hue, each time the tentative address had grated upon his ear. "Mr. Jernigan of Costessy, if you must know."

The landlord bowed, a trifle deeper than he had bowed before.

THE LITTLE LOVER

"Indeed, sir!" quoth he as if mightily impressed—for if he did not know the name, which is of the east country, he knew the type of traveller as we have said before.

Mr. Jernigan here turned, with a charming bashful consciousness of his own importance, to permit his valet to divest him of his muffings. And the landlord chuckled to himself to hear the man, most obviously an old family retainer, whisper: "Are your feet damp, Master Julian?" and to mark the petulant annoyance with which the latter whisked himself out of his coat and stood forth, so slim, so comely and so youthful—so very youthful in the dancing light of the great fire.

"Have you many people in the house, landlord?" inquired the traveller in a manner calculated to remove any false impression of juvenility which might have been suggested by old Jonas's absurd solicitude.

"Our common rooms are all full, being market day to-morrow; but for the upper parlours, sir, a few gentlemen, who, like yourself, have found the night too cold to push on to Bath." He paused, jerked out his chin. He was listening. "If I mistake

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

not, here come other claimants for the far-famed hospitality of 'the Bear.'"

Master Lawrence had a neat command of language. Indeed, he was decidedly a man of parts, who had oddly drifted into inn-keeping. If he found a special pleasure in his present avocation it was (as he was fond of saying) because it takes a gentleman to deal rightly with gentlefolks; and then he would more than hint at the elegant vicissitudes of his past life.

To hear the clatter of hoofs, the breezy cry of "House!", the sounds of stable bustle rising in the night, to see mine host hurry to the door with the same mixture of patronage and obsequiousness with which he had himself just been received, filled Mr. Jernigan's bosom with a flutter of expectancy. He lingered by the hearth. All things were pleasingly new to him.

Master Lawrence, poised for his bow, had already begun to classify: "Chaise with coat of arms. Post horses, a vast amount of luggage. Lady of fashion — rich lady of fashion. Plague take me to have let the best rooms to that green-sprig . . . Three ladies! Nay, two and a maid. Capons and Sillery, blanc-mange and cakes. Aye, whom have

[198]

THE LITTLE LOVER

we here? A horseman. Bless my soul!" cried the innkeeper aloud, "if it is not Mr. O'Hara!" He pulled a grimace between hilarity and anxiety. "This means a thinner cellar to-night. Would I were as sure of a fatter purse!"

But the good man's brow cleared as a sweet imperious voice issued from the deeps of the chaise, and a little round face, peering out, caught the light from the hospitably extended doors.

"Mistress Bellairs!" —

Mistress Bellairs, rich, fastidious and lavish, as he knew; who, wherever she went, was promptly surrounded by a kind of little court.

"You are welcome at 'the Bear,' Madam. Allow me to give you a hand. What a night for a lady like you to be on the road!"

As if in dramatic emphasis a wild gust of wind, wet-dabbled with sleet, took up the cue and drove Mistress Kitty Bellairs in at the door like a ball of thistledown.

Then Julian Jernigan, watching all agog, saw how this same mocking storm-wind fought with the second traveller as she descended from the chaise. How it tore apart the wings of her cloak, swept fluttering

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

garments close against the slender swaying limbs, engulfed itself in the secrets of her very hood, to lay bare triumphantly a countenance, pale as a pearl, fair as a flower. And Julian, looking, felt within himself a singular stirring, for it was a countenance beyond the beauty of his dearest dream. And upon the fair surface of his virgin heart the impression was struck with a pang that went beyond joy, fairly into pain.

His head swirled as giddily as the smoke in the eddying gusts. When he came to himself the travellers were grouped within a yard of him — all looking towards him. A little lady with kitten face and eyes like brown pansies; his own bewilderingly lovely lady, with a gaze that looked beyond him and saw him not; a merry gentleman, whose red curls shone crisp through faint powdering and whose merry orbs twinkled in a disconcerting manner. And the landlord, although still addressing himself to the new comers, was obviously talking at him.

“If I had had any warning of Mistress Bellairs’ honoured arrival,” he was saying emphatically, “I should have reserved the best rooms for her. It is not, I protest, five

❧ THE LITTLE LOVER ❧

minutes since I promised them to this gentleman."

"Sure," cried the man with the merry eyes, "it's the grandest opportunity he's ever had in his life!"

Still giddy from his sudden emotion Mr. Jernigan failed to perceive the drift of these observations. The pansy-eyes first looked reproachful, then shot sparks of anger. But sweetly indifferent were those other eyes — grey violets wet with autumn rain — that looked past him and through him into the fire behind.

"I could give the young gentleman a very good bed, all to himself, his only other companion would be a distinguished officer ——"

A light broke upon the boy: "My rooms!" he cried, "Oh, certainly, I am only too glad — Pray, Madam, consider them absolutely at your disposal!"

Mistress Bellairs had turned a very engaging smile upon him; but as he finished his sentence to her silent companion, she tossed her head ever so slightly: "I thank you, sir," said she.

"Did n't I tell you!" exclaimed the gentleman whom the landlord had greeted as Mr. O'Hara: "the opportunity of a lifetime!"

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

You're young yet, sir, but if you live to be a hundred, you'll never regret that four-post bed ! ”

Although of an age which does not as a rule relish being reminded of its immaturity, Julian Jernigan found something so genial in the speaker's broad smile, that his own lips promptly responded. Mistress Bellairs suddenly paused as she was about to move away. There was no doubt about it: here was an uncommonly comely youth. She had no objection herself to the April of manhood ; and when it smiled like that, when it had such an ingenuously blushing cheek and stood withal in so pretty a gentility, she considered it quite worth cultivating, were it only for a winter evening's entertainment.

“ Truly,” said she, “ this is vastly civil ! We are under obligation to you, sir. Perhaps,” she added with a half turn of her little capuchine towards her escort, “ perhaps the gentleman would give us the privilege of his company at table to-night.”

Oh, with what an infinity of pleasure ! Mr. Jernigan stammered, blushed, could find no suitable words ; but his guileless emotion was very eloquent.

THE LITTLE LOVER

"We shall be charmed," asserted the lady in a delicate tone of patronage. "And Mistress Bellairs is your hostess's name."

She sketched him the curtsey of a woman of quality, expressive of the exact terms she wished to inaugurate. Julian bowed.

"Mr. O'Hara, sir." She waved her hand. "Mr. — ?"

She was poised on the edge of the query like a bird on a twig. And as the young traveller once more gave his name and state he felt he must have exhausted his stock of blushes, yet was not without a tingle of pride in the goodly ring of the old patronymic. And Mistress Bellairs was not without an air of approval herself and the condescension of recollecting that she had acquaintance with certain of his kin. Then: "Mr. O'Hara, son of my Lord Kilcronev," said she, proceeding with her introductions in good form, "Mr. Jernigan of Costessy."

"Delighted to know you, my boy!" said the merry gentleman with a rich and genial accent that was strange to Julian's ears.

"We shall meet then, presently," said Mistress Bellairs. But Mr. Jernigan, whose glance for ever roamed back to the tall lady who stood, so seemingly apart, with sad

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

dreaming eyes fixed upon the fire, now looked again towards her, in such evident surprise and expectation, that Mrs. Bellairs followed the direction of his gaze. For a scarce perceptible instant, she hesitated, then flushed:

"My friend," said she. "My friend, Miss Rachel."

The girl started and shifted her slow eyes from the speaker to the young stranger who bent before her with an air of profound deference. As he rose from his bow, their glances met and he was struck to the heart again: by her beauty as before, but also by something else—by those deeps of sorrow in the violets of her eyes.

"I insist on your coming down to supper," said Kitty. The tone of her voice conveyed anger, and so did the stamp of her red heel; but there was a glimmer as of tears on the edge of her eyelashes. The great, long room was sparsely lit, though Lydia had foraged the inn for candles. There were gulfs of gloom behind the four-post bed. True, the panelled walls and the carpetless boards reflected the flame of the candles here and there on their high polished surface, but

THE LITTLE LOVER

they shone with no more effect than little yellow crocuses scattered in a desolate brown garden.

Kitty's travelling companion had laid aside her cloak and hood, but shared in none of Mrs. Bellairs' toilet activities. Sitting opposite the newly-kindled fire, she was once more gazing before her with hands listlessly folded on her lap. At the petulant address she rose.

"Indeed, I pray you to excuse me."

"I'll not excuse you! You've scarce taken bite or sup to-day."

"I can be served here."

"Worse and worse! The thing's out of all reason."

"Alas, madam, there is but too good reason! Yourself — yourself ——"

"Myself, what, pray?"

"You could not bring yourself to give my full name to the young gentleman. Oh, you are right: I have cast discredit upon it. I would not cast discredit upon you."

Kitty flamed scarlet and the tears brimming between her eyelashes suddenly bubbled over. She made a rush forward and caught the other in a tight clasp.

"It was not for that!" she cried in tones

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

that would scream down an inner sense of guilt. Then, shaking her friend and scolding passionately: "How dare you say so! 'T was for you, 't was to spare you! Why, Rachel Peace, the celebrated actress, if it got about the house, they would stare us to death! Why, child, who knows or cares about your private misfortune? I, for one, think you're the purest soul I've ever met. Oh! you foolish thing, I say you shall not remain here moping! I'll not eat a morsel if you don't come down. Nay, Rachel, for love of me!"

Now, when her benefactress said: "For love of me!" Rachel Peace bowed her head meekly; for what could she do but submit?

"Lydia," cried Mrs. Bellairs, turning suddenly upon her tirewoman who was whisking garments about and inhaling the air with the most protesting sounds she dared make: "sniff once more . . . and you quit my service at Bath!"

"And pray, yang man, are you aware that this is my room? Stap my vitals," cried Captain Spicer, "shall not a gentleman have his privacy!"

Julian Jernigan lifted his dripping face

THE LITTLE LOVER

from the basin where he had been sluicing away in cold water the stain of travel, and turned it, rosy and shining, upon the interpellator. Viewing the latter's spindle frame and long bilious countenance with some disfavour, he answered haughtily that the companionship was none of his choice, but the landlord's.

"Too bad of the fallow!" asseverated the Captain closing the door with military clatter. "The creature wants a lesson. Rat him! He must be taught how to behave to a gen——" He broke off abruptly.

Swaggering up to the table, legs well apart, he had caught sight of some of Mr. Jernigan's belongings carelessly thrown upon it—a silver-hilted sword; a heavy chain with a bunch of seals and a brace of watches, one of these encrusted with gold of three colours and little gems; a silken purse, agreeably swollen at either end. Such a purse as Captain Spicer had rarely had the privilege of holding in his hand, but of the kind which he benevolently desired to find in the possession of those young favourites of fortune to whom it was his life-vocation to attach himself. A glitter came into his pale eyes.

There was, as we know, a certain obliquity

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

of vision connected with these orbs at the best of times. But when their owner became excited the peculiarity increased to an alarming extent. Just now, however, it seemed to provide him with the advantage of fixing the articles on the table and the young gentleman at the wash-hand stand at one and the same time.

"Though, indeed," he went on, and had no shame in this ungraduated change from blustering to fawning, "when one is quartered with so gallant a companion as yourself, sir, by the Lard, a man would be charl to find grounds for aught but congratulation."

And while, over the edge of the towel, Julian regarded him with innocent amazement, the astute parasite proceeded:

"In the Sarvice, sir? No? Strange, you have the military air. On your way back from the Grand Tour, I presume — there is, I see, the foreign dash — No? Ah! but you've had your racket in Tawn." And this last impeachment, blushing down to the fine ruffled shirt, parted upon a throat as white and round as a girl's, the poor boy, who felt his lovely youth such a burden, had not the courage to disclaim.

[208]

THE LITTLE LOVER

"Master Ju," said the old servant, popping in his head unceremoniously at the door, "will I give you a hand with your cue?" And Mr. Jernigan, of Costessy, felt it incumbent upon his dignity to dismiss the over-officious valet with a proper and manlike brevity: "When I require you, Jonas, I shall summon you."

If Mistress Bellairs had thought Julian Jernigan a pretty youth as he stood, garbed for travelling, in the shadowy fireglow, she thought him ten times more so as he entered her brilliantly lit parlour. With an eye that had something maternal in its appraising, the young widow noted how the colour came and went upon his fair cheek; how the quick breath fluttered his nostrils, yet how high he held his crested head with its nimbus of powdered hair; how deliberately he moved and yet with how boyish a consciousness of everybody's gaze.

"Mr. Stafford — Mr. Jernigan." It was quite a minute before the buzzing blood in Julian's ears subsided sufficiently to enable him to understand what Mrs. Bellairs was saying, as, after mechanically bowing to an unknown gentleman, he took seat between

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

her and the lady whom he knew as Miss Rachel.

"Mr. Stafford," quoth Kitty, "is an old friend. He heard of my being on the road to Bath, and started immediately to meet me. I feel prodigious flattered."

She extended a white hand towards the gentleman in question. But, having to pass Mr. O'Hara to reach him, the latter seized it and bestowed such tender kisses upon it that positively Mr. Jernigan could not look on, but had to keep his eyes bent on his plate. Through the clamour of laughter and protest there stole upon his consciousness a voice as sweet and low as the sigh of an Æolian harp.

"Are you travelling alone?" Rachel Peace was asking.

He turned to find her looking at him with such kindness in her eyes that his heart fluttered. He thought to divine that to her this mockery of love and courtship, in which Mrs. Bellairs seemed to have her being, was as embarrassing as it was to him. Nay, she seemed to shrink from even the proximity of her gallant and handsome neighbour, Mr. Stafford; to have gathered her skirts away, to have shifted her seat as far as possible. A

❧ THE LITTLE LOVER ❧

circumstance which, while it made him wonder a little, he rejoiced at—for did it not bring her into sweet proximity to himself—the fall of her lace, the curve of her grey sleeve now and again brushing his arm and sending thrills of that new joyful pain to his heart.

“I have been visiting relatives in the south,” confided the youth, “and am now on my way to the Bath, where I am awaited by an uncle.”

She glanced at the deep black of the sleeve; then she said, with a sigh running through the words:

“I, too, am alone.”

He ventured to look full at the delicate face bending towards him.

“Alone?” he queried, ardent admiration, respectful sympathy in his tone. “Alone!” That she should be alone, and wear that plaintive sorrow of it in her eye!

“Yes,” she told him, sinking her voice still lower, “I am only travelling with this lady a little way. She has been very good to me, but we do not belong together.”

He was not surprised at that. Mistress Bellairs was very kind, no doubt, and vastly admired, evidently; but, compared to

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Her . . . ! His emboldened eye moved quickly from one to the other, betraying his thought. She pressed her lips together and then, drawing a quick breath, laid her finger on his black cuff.

"I want to tell you something," she said almost inaudibly. "My name is Rachel Peace."

His innocent blue gaze widened; then he smiled like a delighted child.

"What a lovely name, and how it suits you, Madam! Rachel Peace!"

To his immense discomfiture he spoke the words into a sudden silence and found that, the scene of coquetry opposite having abruptly ceased, he was again the centre of attention. But he did not notice that, beside him, Rachel had cast down her eyes and grown white to the lips. Perhaps Kitty, in spite of her laughter was not above a feminine pique to find that the pretty boy had positively no eyes for another charming presence. Perhaps she was displeased with her *protégée* for betraying her own pious fraud. At any rate, she here remarked, with some dryness that doubtless Mr. Jernigan was already familiar with the name.

The boy looked bewildered: "There is a

THE LITTLE LOVER

most respected family of Friends, at Norwich —” he began, when feeling the girl start beside him, he stopped, looked at her hesitatingly and saw her crimson to the temples.

Then Mr. Stafford leaned across the table and spoke:—

“The fact is,” said he, “we have been unkind, Mr. Jernigan, in not informing you of the privilege you enjoy to-night. Miss Rachel Peace is one of England’s most gifted actresses, a lady universally admired and universally respected, and the Prince of Wales himself might well envy you your place beside her.”

The full white lids of Rachel’s eyes were cast down till the long lashes seemed to sweep the cheek. One would have scarce thought she heard, but for the wavering colour and the sensitive trembling of her lips. Mr. O’Hara was thumping the table in vehement approval.

“Did n’t I tell you!” said he. “Ah, it’s not everybody, my boy, that can say he sat between Bellairs, who has broken every heart in England, and Peace — who’s trampled on all the rest. Keep the secret dark, my dear friend, or we’ll be having a mob in upon us!”

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

Kitty bridled. Mr. O'Hara's comparative compliments struck her as clumsy. As for Julian he was frankly bewildered : this dove-grey lady, with the sad and tender eyes, this fulfilment of all his loveliest presentiments — an actress ! Then had he been through life misled ; then was an actress's calling the most noble, the most soul-inspiring which a woman could follow ; then was the play-house the nursery of all beautiful dignity, all white-winged modesty ! But why, upon their praise of her, should she droop her head and wear the pain of the world in her sweet face ?

Into this silence, pregnant with doubt and trouble, everyone welcomed an external diversion — a gentle scratching which was now heard at the door.

"Come in !" cried Kitty petulantly. And as the scratching but continued louder : "Come in !" cried Stafford with all the volume of his sonorous voice, while : "More power to your claw !" exclaimed Mr. O'Hara, a kind of observation with which that gentleman made free — much to Julian Jernigan's mystification.

But if the scratching had been welcome, the scratcher himself, as he inserted a long

❖ THE LITTLE LOVER ❖

sallow countenance through the gingerly opened door, was not.

"Why, 't is Captain Spicer," said Kitty in tones of disgusted astonishment.

"Spoicer, is it?" ejaculated the Honourable Denis, and muttered something anent the devil's impudence, between his teeth.

"Mr. Spicer, sir," said Stafford with the most deadly politeness, "you are evidently mistaking — this is not the public room!"

But Captain Spicer had made good his footing and was now advancing upon the table with that winning sidle characteristic of his most elegant moments.

Once again all Julian's unschooled blood rushed to his cheeks. He felt a sort of responsibility for the appearance of his chance chamber-mate, whose conversation he was now ashamed of having found entertaining since this military gentleman was known only in ill-regard by his table companions.

"Aha, my young friend!" said the intruder, menacing him with a waggish finger, "so here is the mysterious lady for whom you denied me your company at sapper. No less a parson than the lovely Kitty. . . . O'Hara, my boy, the tap of the night to you — as you would say yourself."

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

("The tap of my toe to ye," muttered O'Hara.) "Staffard, old crony ——"

"This room is a private room, Captain Spicer," said Stafford with his former cruel suavity, while Kitty, after staring with perfectly expressionless eyes at the Captain's wreathed countenance, suddenly began to address O'Hara with that perfection of insolence only to be encompassed by a woman of the highest fashion:

"The creature had the face to call upon me in town, nay, I had to get Sir George Payne to turn him out of my box at Covent Garden ——"

Even Captain Spicer, although it was the trade of his life to swallow rebuffs, as a dog swallows crusts in the hope of better morsels, could scarce keep up his smile of assurance before such a reception. His cheeks grew mottled; he breathed hard; his eyes squinted more fearfully than ever as they roamed from face to face. All at once they halted: their obliquity drew together and there was a kind of flicker between their white eyelashes.

"And pray, my fair Bellairs, how is it we still find you fair Bellairs? When last I was in Tawn with my Lard Ffarrington, the world was ringing with noble news of

THE LITTLE LOVER

approaching wedding-bells, he, he! Were there other claimants for my Lord Mandeville's ring, eh, Staffard?"

Julian felt a sort of shudder run through the still figure at his side, then a faint movement, as if towards flight. There was a pause, the tension of which oppressed even him who knew nothing.

"He, he!" cried Captain Spicer, now giving full vent to a triumphant spitefulness. "Is it passible. . . . Do I behold the beautiful Thespian, Miss Peace? Verily, it is even so . . . O Peace, Peace, why didst thou leave the Tawn in desolation?"

And Julian, who of her fellow-guests was the only one that dared look at Rachel, saw her slowly rear her head upon her long throat and fix a steady eye upon the speaker.

"Spicer," said Mr. O'Hara, suddenly springing to his feet, "I'll give you ten seconds to take your nose out of the reach of my fingers!"

"Open the door, O'Hara!" Staffard was crying at the same instant. "I was reckoned pretty good at football in my day."

The cheeks of the led-captain worked as you may see those of an angry toad. Once

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

again he looked from right to left choosing the spot where to split his venom. Then:

“Ha!” cried he, forgetting the last remnant of his professional prudence in a fresh spasm of malignity. “Pradigious clever move of yours, Mrs. Kitty, to have kidnapped the chief impediment! He-he! I begin to understand, naw, how the vartuous Bellairs finds herself in sach campany!”

Then, twisting round and thrusting his lean chin over Julian’s shoulder, offensively close to Rachel’s face:

“And pray, Miss,” said he, “how did you leave my Lord Mandeville?”

Upon this there was a rising in three quarters of the table at once and a sudden scuffle in the midst of which it was hard to discriminate. But Kitty Bellairs, watching with interest, thought to distinguish that he who — dashing back his chair — slapped Captain Spicer across the face with a napkin, was Mr. Jernigan of Costessy: while it was Mr. Stafford and Mr. O’Hara who between them hustled the intruder through the door.

The *fracas* once fairly over, however, the little widow felt it incumbent upon her to be seized with a delicate fit of vapours. And

THE LITTLE LOVER

this new excitement so fully occupied the attention of herself and her two cavaliers that it was not until Rachel, rising from her seat, clasped her hands and exclaimed in tones of anguish: "Merciful heavens—where is Mr. Jernigan?" that, looking round in surprise, they perceived the young gentleman's absence.

"Oh!" cried Rachel, "he has gone forth to quarrel—a mere lad.—For pity's sake, gentlemen, seek him! Prevent bloodshed . . . Ah! what have I done that this curse of drawn swords should follow me wherever I go!"

When Mr. Stafford and Mr. O'Hara, to calm the Quaker's distress, and perhaps slightly infected themselves by her alarm, went forth to seek young Mr. Jernigan, they looked for him in vain through hall and parlour. Then, proceeding to his chamber, they were met at the door by old Jonas, who seemed in great anxiety of mind.

"Oh, sirs," he cried, "there's the devil's work going on in here . . . and they've locked themselves in!" Then the man's face worked. "He's the last of the old stock!" said he.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

“Pooh!” cried Denis, consolingly, “what a pother all this about nothing. Spicer wags his tongue more freely than his sword, I’ll tell you that!”

And, indeed, when they reached the locked door and stood all three, on a sudden impulse, listening, it certainly did seem as if the light-hearted gentleman’s opinion were the correct one. For Spicer’s voice was grinding on within, evidently on peaceful terms intent; nay, he was punctuating his discourse by cackling self-applause.

O’Hara bent his ear to catch the words:

“Stap me, you don’t know your friends, sir,” the gallant Captain was saying. “Come, give me the key, my good lad: by the Lard, I’ve no quarrel with you.”

“But I’ve a quarrel with you, sir —” and old Jonas started to hear his little master speak with that new note of manliness, “you have insulted, sir, a lady whom I honour, whom I revere . . .”

Here the lad’s voice trembled, and Stafford and O’Hara exchanged a smile which was unconsciously tender. — It was as if the ghost of their own dead boyhood rose before them: they had passed that way themselves. And oh, what a long road had they not travelled since!

THE LITTLE LOVER

"Why, rat it all!" cried the Captain then from within, and it could be heard that his sweet humour was growing a trifle sour. "You're yang, Mr. Jarnigan, or, upan my saul, I should take it ill of you! Why, you yang pappy, I came down into that room, merely to show you what a crew it was you had taken ap with. Bellairs, whom all the men are running away from, dem it, and those two bullies, sir, whom she keeps to fight the runaways! Why, gad, if you'd not been so green from the country, my poor friend, you'd have heard of that Staffard fallow's encounter with my Lard Mandeville. And talking of my Lard and his jilting of poor Kitty, he, he! brings me to this Rachel Peace—and a pretty piece, he, he!—a baggage ——!"

"What a pestilent tongue it has," said Staffard without, and raised his hand to beat a warning rat-tat on the panels. But O'Hara was too well entertained.

"Wait a bit," he urged, "'t is as good as a play and the lad's giving it to him in fine style!"

And indeed there was a shout from Julian Jernigan.

"Silence! Liar!"

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"Rachel Peace! Rachel Peace, you booby! Why all the world knows she's my Lard Mandeville's——"

"Thunder an' ouns!" exclaimed O'Hara straightening himself with an irrepressible sparkle in his eyes, "but that was a master slap!"

There was a pause within, a breathless moment without. Then Captain Spicer's snarl:

"Yah—since you will have it!" followed by the hiss of the steel sliding from the scabbard like an angry snake.

"When a creature's pushed to it, he's dangerous," suddenly exclaimed O'Hara and aimed for the door with a sturdy lurch of his shoulder, but this time it was Stafford who intervened.

"Too late now," he said, "they're at it. If you jog the drinkers' elbows, you may spill the wrong cup. The lad needs all his wits about him—Spicer's a white-liver, but he's an old hand."

"True," said O'Hara, and fell back.

Jonas shifted piteous eyes from one to the other. His lips moved as if repeating to himself: "The last of the old stock!"

It was not to be a long wait: even to those

THE LITTLE LOVER

listeners in suspense without it seemed an appallingly short one. There was a stamp of feet—and they could distinguish the boy's clean spring backwards and forwards, Spicer's slouching shoe and Spicer's reiterated cry: "Saha! Sa-sa! Have at you!" after the fashion of the practised bully. But from young Julian came never a word.

Then the Captain raised a yell of triumph, succeeded by a deadly little silence, into which presently came the sound of a heavy fall.

The servant moaned like an old dog and Stafford made a sign to O'Hara. Before their united rush the door fell open, and they burst, one on the top of the other, into the room.

Spicer, the grin petrified upon his swollen mouth, turned round upon them, still brandishing a blood-stained sword; but, as all three hurried up to the prostrate figure on the floor, the gallant gentleman saw his opportunity and made good his exit without further ado.

It seemed such a very small figure, that of the valiant little lover, as it lay all huddled together, that O'Hara with a break in his voice cried out to seize the scoundrel who

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

had murdered a child. But Stafford looking up from where he knelt and drawing out his hand all crimsoned with good Jernigan blood from the ruffled shirt that had been donned this evening over so high a heart, bade him let the carrion go but have a surgeon summoned; the lad was not dead, but he feared the wound was in the lung.

Two anxious women were waiting in the parlour for the medical verdict when Stafford came in upon them, grave, yet not with that final gravity that leaves no room for hope.

"If he wins through the night, the surgeon thinks he may yet live," said he.

Rachel folded her hands as if in prayer. But Kitty's face fell; one of those beings made for the sunny side of life, she took trouble with petulance, struggling against it as a bird beats its wings in a trap.

"Why did any of you let a little gentleman like him cross swords with such a thing as Spicer? Why could n't you fight yourselves, either of you two big men, instead of the child? Fie upon you! Or why did he fight at all, and what did he fight for?"

The question was emphasised with that

THE LITTLE LOVER

stamp of her little foot so familiar to the devotees of Kitty.

Stafford hesitated; he looked at Rachel. Then Rachel raised her lovely heavy eyes:

"He fought for me, for my good name," said she. "Is it not so?"

And, as Stafford's silence answered for him, she went on, quite calmly, though her lips quivered in bitterness: "I had done less harm, had I remained where you found me, madam. Oh, I am not the less grateful to you that you tried to save me! But for such as me, you see, there is no saving. My sin will follow me."

"Miss Rachel," said Stafford, going up to her and taking her hand—he was a man who had the reputation of a very cold heart under his air of gayest good humour, but Rachel Peace ever after bore his memory in gratitude for his kind touch, his kind look at this moment of her misery. "Miss Rachel—he is asking for you, have you the courage?"

At that, she lifted her head:

"Oh, I should be coward, indeed, to think of myself!" said she.

"A rare woman! I always knew it," thought Stafford.

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

Rachel stood looking at Julian Jernigan's colourless face; then, as he opened his languid eyes, bent down and took his hand.

"You are not to speak," she said, "I am here to nurse you, and you will soon get well!"

Jonas, struggling with his tears at the foot of the bed, turned his bewildered old gaze upon her as if on the apparition of an angel. And Julian, murmuring something about peace and her being all white like the lilies and its being a happy way to die (which he thought was quite a long speech), turned his head on his pillow and went back to that place of vague dreams which was half swoon, half sleep.

Vastly insulted at the mere suggestion that she should betake herself to bed, while Rachel watched the wounded champion, Mistress Kitty elected to spend the night (in monstrous discomfort) on a chair before the fire in her own apartment.

Towards that bleak and most weary hour, however, just before the winter dawn, she allowed herself to be beguiled downstairs into Master Lawrence's own cosy library

❧ THE LITTLE LOVER ❧

where he and Mr. O'Hara had passed a not unpleasant time between varied discourse and a noble bowl of spiced wine. (The landlord of "the Bear" had far too exalted a conception of his calling, to think of slumber while guests of quality watched.)

"Just the least little thimbleful in the world, Kitty," had whispered the insinuating Denis through the keyhole of her door, "and a toast of your darling little feet at the handsomest fire I've seen this winter!"

And thus O'Hara's divinity, rather injured, very pettish, somewhat pale, with a pretty mouth ever caught upon a yawn, had consented to establish herself before Master Lawrence's handsome fire, to stretch out her darling little feet to the blaze, to sip the fragrance of Mr. O'Hara's offering — although with many a little choking grimace and protestation. Master Lawrence had discreetly retired upon her arrival.

"By the powers!" said O'Hara. "It's not that I'm not sorry for the little fellow upstairs, but it's a poor heart that never rejoices!"

But, alas for the happy lover! This is a poor world in which a rich heart's rejoicing is never of long duration. Mr. O'Hara,

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

was not destined to hold his gallant opportunity more than a minute's span.

Into the silence of the night, there came a knocking at the street door, a barking of dogs, a running of feet, an excited parley; and, before either of the two ensconced in their snug retreat had time to interchange surprise and conjecture, Master Lawrence hurried in.

The worthy innkeeper's face was flushed, his manner important. He craved ten thousand pardons, but there was a traveller without: a gentleman . . . a nobleman.

He was not permitted to finish his phrase for here an unceremonious hand thrust him aside, and the traveller in question stood in the doorway!

"So, Mistress Bellairs," cried Lord Mandeville. "So, madam! Thus we meet again!"

The noble Earl's address, however, was scarcely as impressive as he could have wished; he had ridden long and hard and the night was one of exceptional rigour. He could hardly speak for his chattering teeth; his face was livid and purple in patches; he staggered now upon his numbed limbs; and, a convulsive shiver seizing him, he was only able further to articulate the name: "Rachel Peace!"

THE LITTLE LOVER

Now O'Hara was a lover himself and full of the largest sympathy towards any suffering member of the brotherhood.

"Whisht!" said he soothingly, "not another word out of you now, till we get the life into you again." He caught up the steaming bowl of wine on the table and held it boldly to the wayfarer's frozen lips.

"Drink, my boy," said he.

Though Lord Mandeville, recognising the excellence of this advice, promptly disposed of the whole brew at a draught, his ill-humour was thereby no whit abated. Setting the empty vessel on the table with a clatter he looked once more from Kitty to O'Hara and in his brooding frown there was something of triumphant fury. Kitty pinched her baby mouth and looked defiance back with right good will. What? Had she once admired this man, had almost consented to bestow on him in marriage her incomparable little self! Heavens, what an escape she had had . . . she who hated ugliness!

"Perhaps," said Lord Mandeville, "you will kindly tell me what you have done with Miss Rachel Peace, whom you carried off from my house, for reasons best known to yourself."

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

His face twisted into a sneer as he spoke ; there was a red glare in his eyes. Then, "Where is Rachel?" he cried with a sudden breakdown of self-control, so that the words rang in a hoarse shout.

"The poor fellow 's as croaky as a crow," said O'Hara to himself, all compassion.

"I will trouble you, my Lord," said Mistress Kitty, ice externally, internally all a little fire of joy at this opportunity for paying back old scores, "to stop screaming. There 's someone dying upstairs——"

"Someone dying!" repeated Lord Mandeville. His tired face went ghastly, his jaw dropped, his eye protruded, he made a vague movement with his hands.

"No, no," cried O'Hara in quick understanding, "she 's well, my lord ; alive and well. Kitty, you 've frightened him out of his wits! 'Tis but a poor lad that's been crossing swords——"

Lord Mandeville threw himself into a chair, leaned his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands.

"A poor lad! A poor child," echoed Mistress Kitty, taking up the tale, throwing each word at the silent man with as deliberate an intention as if she were aiming little arrows.

❧ THE LITTLE LOVER ❧

"A poor child, who has shed his blood, my lord, given his life perhaps, to defend the fair name of Rachel Peace; that fair name which you have now made such that every ruffian on the road thinks himself entitled to cast his handful of mud at it. Rachel Peace, Sir——"

"Whom you robbed me of," said his lordship, opening his fingers to throw out from between them a red look upon her.

"Whom I took pity on," cried she, "whom I gave shelter to, as I would have sheltered a wounded dove—poor dove!" said Kitty, waxing dithyrambic, "with white wings broken, all maimed and hurt! Ah! my lord, you men have fine sport!"

"Enough, madam!" said Lord Mandeville springing up with so fierce an air that even she quailed before it. "Where is Rachel? I dare you to keep her from me. She's in this house, I know. I'll find her if I have to break into every room. Rachel! Give me back my girl . . ."

And, seeing (Denis afterwards explained to the outraged Kitty) that, as his lordship was as blind drunk and mad drunk with love as ever a man could be, there seemed nothing for it but to humour him, Mr. O'Hara vol-

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

unteered to conduct him to the chamber where Mr. Stafford was keeping a friendly night watch near the sick-room, and thither to lure Rachel Peace for a few moments from Mr. Jernigan's bedside.

As soon as Mistress Kitty had recovered from her stupefaction at Mr. O'Hara's audacity, she decided to follow the reprobates upstairs, solely moved (as she told herself) by the benevolent desire of affording Rachel the protection of one of her own sex at such a juncture — and in no manner by curiosity or any desire to keep her pretty fingers in the pie.

When she peeped into Mr. Stafford's chamber she found it empty of all save of that gentleman's presence. With his head tilted back on the top of the armchair, an open book on his knee, a guttering candle beside him, he was sound asleep; little gentle snorts escaped rhythmically from his well-cut nostrils. Scarcely the situation in which a man of elegance would wish to be found by the lady of his heart! Kitty closed the door again and stood a second in reflection. With Mr. Stafford also she had once been near (very near) matrimony!

Then, gathering her skirts together and

❧ THE LITTLE LOVER ❧

tripping it as softly as her high heels would allow she turned the corner of the passage towards the beckoning of a lamp. Then she started back and held her breath; she had only just escaped falling into Lord Mandeville's arms.

At the same moment a door a little lower down in the long gallery was opened and Rachel Peace came forth. Unseen, Kitty watched.

Lord Mandeville with a sound as if something clicked in his throat, made a quick step towards the girl.

"O hush!" said Rachel glancing over her shoulder, as O'Hara now came forth in his turn and closed the sick-room door behind him. "Hush!" said she, "he is awake." Her thoughts were all for the boy.

"Rachel!" said Lord Mandeville in a queer angry, choked voice.

She drew close to him that she might bear him away to silence, and he caught her into his arms. Then she seemed to realise what his presence meant and cried: "Oh, why are you here!" with a wail under her breath. And Kitty heard with a strange mixture of feelings the deep tender note in Lord Mandeville's voice as he answered:

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

"Because I cannot live without you Rachel . . . Rachel!"

But Rachel had disengaged herself; the man could no more have held her just then than he could have held running waters.

"I must go back to the boy," she said. This great, passionate lover who had wrought such havoc in her life, he was to step back now and yield place to the all paramount little lover who gave all and wanted nothing. "I have just a faint hope." She moved a pace or two and stood between the two men.

"Indeed, my lord," said O'Hara, "I think you must be content to let her go back to him, for faith I believe her presence alone keeps Death at bay."

And Kitty, watching, guessed how Lord Mandeville's heart was torn by jealous pangs. She had caused many passions, or so she flattered herself, but she had never seen anything like this!

But Rachel still paused and hesitated; then with the corners of her sweet mouth trembling downwards, like a chidden child's, she said gently:

"He fought for me, poor little lad. Oh, gentlemen, you both know why! He must not ——" she paused, her lips quivered piti-

THE LITTLE LOVER

fully and the words seemed hard to speak. "It would be very kind," she said, "if every one would allow him to believe — would let him die, if he is to die, believing in me — or would wait till he gets well before telling him — the truth."

Her voice sank into a whisper. O'Hara turned abruptly away. But Lord Mandeville fell upon his knees before her in the passage and buried his face in her grey skirt.

"No, no," said Rachel Peace. She was sitting beside Julian Jernigan's bed and held his cold hand in both hers. "No, you are not going to die. The surgeon is quite content with you this morning. You are going to live." She was smiling at him and he smiled back at her.

"I don't think I care," said he. He was unutterably happy with both those lovely hands seeming to uphold his heart. Then, with the quick senses of the wanderer in the borderland, he became aware of other presences in the room. The merry gentleman with the twinkling eyes, and a stranger to whom Rachel Peace suddenly looked up — as he closely saw and more closely felt — with some strongly stirring emotion.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

Lord Mandeville gazed down at Rachel's champion, his mouth twisted into something between a smile and a spasm of pain. He had actually been jealous in his jealous heart, had grudged her with doubt and suspicion, to this boy with the dank yellow curls and the white child's face! And, as Rachel Peace still looked up, her soft eyes full of wonder, and fear and expectation, Lord Mandeville, bending, took Mr. Julian Jernigan's hands from her clasp. He had a very noble manner when he chose — and, perhaps, under all his wild passions he had something of a noble soul.

"Mr. Jernigan," said he, "I will not say to you that I am sorry to see you in such a plight, for indeed, sir, I envy you! I have heard of your defence of this gentle lady. No man, sir, could shed his blood in a worthier cause. I am proud to make your acquaintance, Mr. Jernigan. And I thank you, in my own name, and that of my affianced wife."

How much Mr. Jernigan understood of this speech, how much he only felt, it were hard to say. His breast swelled with a great pride, with a great pain and a very high and grand joy. And everything swam before

THE LITTLE LOVER

him until suddenly he was called back again to the inn-bed, to his wound and to life generally, by Rachel's voice in his ears, and Rachel's tears upon his cheek — aye and by something else, the touch of Rachel's lips upon his brow!

And, "Oh, I thank you too!" she was saying, "from my heart I thank you!"

"If you cast me off," said Lord Mandeville, as they two were alone at last and he held Rachel Peace to his heart, "if you cast me off, Rachel, then I am lost indeed."

"I — cast thee off!" murmured Rachel, "Ah Lionel — thee knows. . . !"

He looked deep, deep into her eyes and read, beyond their joy and hopefulness, the shadow of an inextinguishable sorrow. Her lips would never utter reproach. In her meek and generous soul, indeed, no blame of him could live; but all the keener did it stab him, this sorrow in her eyes which he knew would be ever there. With what a delicate pride would she not have held her head for his coronet — a little while ago! How bridal a heart she would have brought him — a little while ago! His poor girl!

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

"Kitty, darling," said O'Hara tentatively, "there's love and marriage in the air this morning—don't you feel it?"

But Mistress Bellairs was in an unapproachable and petulant mood. She whisked her hand away from his grasp.

"Bah!" said she, "there's not one of you creatures that come dangling about me, that knows even the meaning of the word Love, sir. Love!" said she. "Ah, I have seen it at last!"





VI

RARELY had Master Thomas Lawrence, the landlord of "the Bear" Inn, Devizes, had the privilege of entertaining so many guests of quality together for so long a period. There was my lord, Earl Mandeville — most celebrated peer! — who actually honoured "the Devizes" by electing to contract there that marriage which was the amazement of the year. There was Mistress Kitty Bellairs, whose name was famous from one end of the Bath road to the other; and with her, her young friend, once celebrated as Rachel Peace, the play-actress, now spoken of with bated breath as: My Lady, Countess of Mandeville. And further in the Queen of

[239]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

Bath's train were two of her courtiers—Mr. Stafford, a spark as fashionable in London as at the Springs, and the Hon. Denis O'Hara (son of Viscount Kilcrouney), a very genial gentleman likewise, but one whose distinguished name Master Lawrence rang oftener than his gold. Then there was Mr. Julian Jernigan, of Costessy, a young squire of consequence in the East Country (who had lain grievously wounded after his affair of delicacy under the roof of "the Bear" itself), and the uncle of the same, my Lord Howard, who, from Bath, where he had been drinking the waters, had come in haste to nurse his kinsman.

But the life of an inn might serve a parable for life itself. Here, for these ten days, had this choice company met and feasted and made merry, suffered and watched and prayed; here had Death threatened and Love vanquished; here had been tears and laughter and kisses. And now, nearly all had gone their divers roads, and their place would be filled by others and the old story go on in the old way.

"Here to-day, gone to-morrow!" moralised Master Lawrence, as he sat in the silence of his "library," puffing at a contemplative

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

churchwarden. And, truly Master Lawrence himself felt the stillness oppressive. But upstairs in the best parlour the atmosphere could not have been described as stagnant.

Mistress Kitty, ensconced in the window-seat looking out on the slush and drizzle of the market place, was biting the string of gold beads that hung round her neck, and swinging—the seat was rather high—one dainty foot impatiently among the billows of her silken skirts.

Denis O'Hara, faithful adorer, thought he had never seen her look to more distracting advantage. She was of the type which a pout becomes. Her eyes showed dark as night, yet bright with a thousand angry little fires, under the white cloud of powdered curls.

“And so,” said the lady, “Mr. Stafford could not bide another day apart from Madame Eglantine—from that little French magpie of a milliner, even for the sake of courtesy to a lady!”

With some humility, as if he were part guilty; though guilty, in sooth, of nothing but joy at a situation which left him undisputed chance, Denis O'Hara loyally responded:

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"Sure the poor fellow was called off on a matter of law."

"Law!" echoed Kitty with a scornful little shriek, "'t is the last thing that his affair is concerned with; though, indeed"—dropping her gold beads and rearing her figure to angry erectness—"mark my words, he'll end by marrying the creature, even as my Lord Mandeville, Rachel Peace, the play-actress."

"Faith, and I know some one whose pretty little fingers helped to put on that ring," said the Irishman, coming a few paces nearer and speaking in a tone of delicate wheedling.

"And much gratitude I am like to get for it!" This, with a toss of the powdered curls. "Little will my Lady Mandeville think of what she owes to humble Mistress Bellairs, when she takes the *pas* of her wherever she goes!"

"Why," said Denis, "you'd be taking the *pas* of most of them in Bath, yourself, Kitty darling, if you'd only consent to become my Viscountess."

"Your *Viscountess*, sir?"

"The poor old gentleman's very bad, over there in County Derry. And, they write me, the cellar's getting very low; the Burgundy's all done—it's my opinion, and medical

THE BLACK LACE MASK

opinion too, that he'll go out with the claret!"

"La! 'Tis vastly pathetic," quoth Kitty, and edged a trifle further away upon the window-seat to correspond to Mr. O'Hara's ingratiating approach.

"Well and it is that, Kitty," said the latter sturdily. "Sure, he's the grand old fellow still, and there's not one in the county can hold as many bottles as he can and turn it all into the real old generous Irish blood. I believe he'll have mortgaged the very oak for his coffin! But he shared it all, Kitty, he shared it all, and will, till he lies alone."

"Prodigious pleasant for you!"

"Ah, it's little I care for the paltry money. There's that in the old name, Kitty, that riches could never buy. And it'll come to me with the shine on it."

"I trust you will find the shine sufficient satisfaction, sir, to make up for an empty pocket."

"Would n't I," cried the man, "if I could but share it with you, pulse of my soul!"

He stretched out his arm to clasp her as he spoke, but drew it back before the cold refusal of her eyes.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

“La, sir, you do me proud, indeed! Sharer of your empty pocket?”

“No, madam — no, my darling, sharer of the good name and sole possessor of my great love!”

“What is this, Mr. O’Hara?”

“It’s just this, Kitty; things cannot go on between us as they’ve been going this last year. Here, to this very inn, a year ago, I brought you as my promised wife, and here you broke my heart on me by throwing me over at the last moment. And here you told me you’d mend it again for me. And what have you been doing ever since, Kitty? Playing cup and ball with it, God forgive me for saying so, as cruelly as a cat with a mouse. Good God, woman, it’s flesh and blood you’ve got here — this is a man, Kitty — and, by the Lord, he’s endured more than human nature can! I am at the end of my tether.”

“Pray, sir,” said Kitty, “not so loud! I have a delicate tympanum.” She raised her hands to her ears. “I am willing to take you at your word. You’re a man, if you please; though, really, with so much braying, and these complaints about your tether, one should have been inclined to think ——”

❖ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❖

"O Kitty!" said he.

Her ears were not so much covered up but that she could hear very well. Her faithful lover's sudden inconvenient outbreak of passion, his tragic tone of reproach, were just the last drops in Mistress Kitty's cup of exasperation. She rose from her seat and flounced into the centre of the room.

"I vow," she cried, "you are perfectly insupportable to-day! Am I not to have a minute's rest from this eternal persecution? La! when I saw those creatures depart this morning, I thought I'd be free of billing and cooing for the rest of my stay."

"And I," said O'Hara, with the same unwonted earnestness and agitation which were so provoking to Mistress Bellairs, "when I saw the look on the faces of those two, as they drove off together, man and wife; when I saw the light in that fellow Stafford's eye, as he set the nose of his nag for Bath; aye, Kitty, when I saw that poor lad, Jernigan, go forth, solitary, if you will, but boy as he was, possessing himself and his dignity, and felt my own self left behind, a mere wretched hanger-on—your dog, to be flung a bone to, patted on the head, or kicked out of the way—the wretched bird at the end of a string——"

[245]

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

"Mercy!" interrupted the lady, with an acid titter, "quite a menagerie, in fact, to want to call itself a man!"

O'Hara fell silent and measured her with a brooding eye.

"Well, sir?" she snapped, when the pause became oppressive.

"Well," answered he, "let us have an end of it, my dear."

"Oh, by all means," quoth she, all perversity: "'tis what I've been longing for this weary hour!"

"It comes to this," he said. He drew close to her and took one of her unwilling little hands in his. This new dominating manner was as unexpected as this new tone. Actually—yes, there could be no doubt of it—he was speaking in hardness, not to say in harshness:

"You must take me or leave me. It must be all or nothing!"

"Oh, indeed!" she said, again trying to titter. "A pistol to my forehead, sir? Your money or your life! Or rather—" taking herself up with an acute crow of anger, "'tis your money *and* your life! That's what it amounts to. And what's the dreadful alternative?"

THE BLACK LACE MASK

He dropped her hand. Again there was silence; she did not allow it to stretch out very long.

"What are you waiting for?" said she; "what keeps you?"

"Looking my last on you," said he.

She laughed with all her dimples and all her cruel little white teeth, with all the mockery of her brown, pansy eyes. What absurd comedy was this? How likely, indeed, that Denis should voluntarily place a span between himself and his beatific vision!

But Mr. O'Hara made a grand bow and turned towards the door.

"Pray, sir," cried Kitty after him, "will Lord Kilcrouney's generous blood enable you to depart from 'the Bear' without causing Master Lawrence too many tears? That empty pocket you are so unselfishly desirous to share with me might ——"

Denis wheeled upon her; and, at sight of his face, she was positively afraid to say another word. He had grown white to the lips, and his eyes showed queer and dark. She had seen him wear that look once before when she had hurt him to the marrow. A second she hesitated—but again quickly

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

drew back. After all, nothing was ever likely to make any permanent difference to that devotion; and it was so pleasant to her upon its present footing that she had no desire to see it altered.

But then to her amazement the door closed between them.

"Bah! What fanfaronade!" quoth she, and went back to the window-seat.

"Master Lawrence," said Mr. O'Hara, "kindly order the saddle on Blue Devil. I am for the road."

Master Lawrence stared stupidly from O'Hara's unwontedly grave countenance to the valise which Boots was just depositing on a bench.

"For the road?" he repeated. "But . . . Mistress Bellairs?"

"I ride alone."

"Alone!" This was strange.

"I'm leaving the rest of my luggage in your charge for the nonce. And I'm in a hurry, landlord. My bill."

Mr. O'Hara calling for his bill! This was strangest of all. So unnatural indeed, that the host began to disclaim: Surely there was no hurry for that!

THE BLACK LACE MASK

"Every hurry, friend." And there was something so decided in Mr. O'Hara's tone, so dignified in his air, that Master Lawrence, without venturing upon another word, hastened to give the order to one of his daughters, whose fingers were as clever at totting up an elegant reckoning as they were in drawing sweet sounds from the spinet.

He presently laid the document before his guest, as that gentleman sat astride a chair, moodily fixing the great fire in the hall. The total made so goodly a show to his proprietary eye that Master Lawrence anticipated, with some flurry of mind, the usual end of a practical joke. Mr. O'Hara, however, after a startled glance and a rapid mental calculation, produced his purse with the same abnormal dignity and gloom, and counted out a tale which left him but two guineas to rub against each other.

Touched in a landlord's tenderest feelings, moved to pity over his erstwhile jovial client's unwonted melancholy, and also not without that sensation of discomfort which an unwholesomely virtuous act awakes in its object, Master Lawrence exclaimed:

"I am sorry, Mr. O'Hara, sir, to see you in such low spirits!"

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

O'Hara's only answer was a lugubrious sigh.

"Why then," said the landlord, "here comes the stirrup-cup; it has been mixed by Mrs. Lawrence."

"Drink it yourself, to our next meeting, our next merry meeting, ha, ha!" cried Denis.

His laugh echoed cavernously as he dashed out of the hall.

The little angry human bird, that was Mistress Kitty, perched on the window-seat, swelling with displeasure against an unappreciative world, beheld, with an inner sinking of the heart and a recrudescence of outer disdain, Mr. O'Hara's horse led forth beneath her windows.

"'Pon honour, he believes that he can frighten me!" thought she, and vowed to blow him the most indifferent farewell kiss when, reckoning upon his recall, he should presently look up at her window.

Mr. O'Hara's valise was strapped to the saddle. Kitty flattered herself she laughed, and was quite unaware that her pretty lips were quivering downwards over a sob.

Out came Denis, booted to the knee, coated to the ears, his hat pulled down over

THE BLACK LACE MASK

his brow—a gloomy figure in the gloomy weather. Up on the impatient horse he sprang; he gathered his reins; Blue Devil struck out his heels; the ostlers fell back. Bare-headed into the drizzle now ran Master Lawrence himself, bowing to the earth—so bowed he only to the guests who had settled their shot. Denis O'Hara and a paid bill! And Mistress Kitty had told herself that without her aid the spendthrift youth could never escape from the clutches of "the Bear!"

She held her breath and bit her lip as she bent eagerly forward. Surely he would look up, surely she would yet catch his eye! But Denis seemed to be unaware of her window. Reining in the impetuous Blue Devil with one hand, he held aloft with the finger and thumb of the other a couple of shining guineas. With no more palpitating anxiety than herself did the two ostlers gaze upon them.

Then with a laugh that rang up to her, and a sort of diabolic recklessness, Mr. O'Hara sent first one coin then the other spinning high in the air to fall between the two stable-boys. . . . And Kitty knew they were his last pieces. Another moment, at a high splashing trot, he was gone. Kitty burst into tears.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

The rain had ceased; but from half-melted snow and soaking hedgerow rose steaming swathes of white mist, behind which the December sun was sinking in sullen red. Leafless shapes of trees like distorted arms upreared themselves, black here and there against this menacing sky, above the shrouding vapours. No sound there was save the drip, drip from the streaming bough or the sudden gurgling collapse of ice across the melting rut. A sodden world, a world enveloped in melancholy, meet prospect for a man to look upon who had settled with himself to have done with life; to have done with it with a vengeance on his neighbour and a challenge to the devil.

Denis O'Hara sat upon his horse in the middle of the cross-roads at Kennet Hill; the ground beneath him rose to a gentle eminence and on every side the sad land fell away, veiled as into some dream of limbo. A little in rear on the right, at the topmost point of the downs and visible from afar — warning much needed, little heeded — rose, against the lurid afterglow of the sky, the gibbet of Alingdown, as usual supplied with a tolerably recent burden, tarred and

THE BLACK LACE MASK

chained. The horseman disdainfully kept his back to it. His coat was turned inside out and showed an evil-looking yellow cloth surface, unlike, indeed, to the garment of a gentleman of such gay habit. Under his hat, the cock of which had been altered, a stolen lace veil, folded into treble thickness and pierced with two jagged holes, formed an impromptu mask.

It was through this ominous addition to his toilet that Mr. O'Hara looked out upon the coming night; and at every breath he inhaled, with acrid self-torture, violet memories of Kitty's scented presence. And, as he waited, brooding upon fate, there rose in the dull stillness the piercing sweet note of a little insistent robin, which seemed to mingle with the flower hauntings and set a final seal, with their unconscious cruelty, their tales of past spring joy, upon the lover's bitterness of heart.

From the far distance presently came an intermittent rumble, hardly perceptible to the ear. Now the rumble, growing continuous, waxed louder, and the sounds separated into distinctiveness — the clapper of hoofs in the slush, the roll of wheels on an indifferently metalled road, punctuated anon by crack of

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

whip, and anon by creak of harness, anon again by snorting breath of distressed horse-flesh.

Mr. O'Hara's attention was aroused. He smiled grimly; drew Blue Devil, whose vain-glorious spirit seemed now to have given place to a most intelligent docility, into the shelter of the hedge; pulled out his pistol and examined it in the half light. Something of the old gleam had leaped into his eye—a moment of reckless audacity could not but hold zest.

It was a heavy chaise. Its lanterns, already lit, bobbed yellow from afar. At the foot of the hill the horses fell to walking pace: a fat pair, too well nurtured and too little exercised to take kindly to journeying work. O'Hara could hear them labour as they advanced, steam encircled. When the sluggish roadsters halted at the top of the hill and, snorting, craned their necks, this seemed to the *dilettante* highwayman the correct dramatic cue for action; the right moment to send Blue Devil leaping out of ambush and, wrenching him back on his haunches within a yard of the box, to pop out his barker and cry: "Halt!" in the best ap-

THE BLACK LACE MASK

proved style of "the High Toby." Although — the cattle being already at a standstill — the adjuration was purely symbolical.

The fat servant in black livery who sat beside the fat coachman gave a lamentable howl and hoisted up the blunderbuss he held between his knees.

O'Hara wheeled Blue Devil upon his hind legs, described a semi-circle round the chaise to repeat the performance for the benefit of the coachman.

Here the blunderbuss went off skywards; and, responding to the intention, Mr. O'Hara (mercifully wide of the human mark) fired his first pistol and extinguished the off lamp. But if the shot had landed in his well-cushioned ribs, he of the blunderbuss could hardly have raised a finer shriek; though the agility with which he flung himself off the box and started running back in the direction of London, spoke volumes for his soundness of wind and limb.

The coachman sat as if paralysed, and the fat horses turned their heads to stare in mild surprise.

Between his knees O'Hara felt every fibre of Blue Devil dance with excitement and his own heart leaped in wild exhilaration. His

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

only regret was that things should seem to come off so tamely. And this was intensified when the carriage window was put down and a voice inquired the meaning of the disturbance in tones which, although ringing in manly sonority, expressed, like the horses, nothing more than a gently scandalised amazement.

O'Hara dismounted, slung the reins over his arm, wrenched the remaining lamp from its socket and held it out to examine his capture. Then he broke into a loud laugh.—By the Powers . . . no less a person than his right reverend lordship, the Bishop of Bath and Wells!

Now this celebrated divine belonged distinctly to the Church Militant and had, as we know, actually a reputation for muscular as well as spiritual power. Mr. O'Hara put the lantern between his feet, not only for the better enjoyment of the humorous situation, but to have some freedom of action in case further persuasion should be required.

But the high Roman nose and the protuberant eye of Dr. Thurlow shone in the flickering yellow light, it seemed, without emotion of any kind.

Mr. O'Hara raised his hat with a flourish.

THE BLACK LACE MASK

"Little thought I," he cried, speaking with as clipping an accent as he could assume, "that it was your lordship's coach I was calling halt to. But I do not regret it. I would carry out my professional duties as peacefully as you would yours, my lord, did circumstances always permit it. It is never my fault if there is strife upon the road! But the laity, as you know, is often so unreasonable. To the point: a shepherd of souls, sir, such as you, holds the treasures of the Church but in trust for the needy. I will relieve your lordship of any anxiety as to the proper bestowal of his funds for a while to come."

He made every effort as he spoke to keep his speech within the limits of the finest English sarcasm, but was conscious of the escape here and there of a rich Milesian intonation.

"Truly, my man," said the Bishop, who had quietly waited for the end of this discourse, "you seem to have a specious tongue — but I think you are here advancing a proposition which is at least open to discussion."

"Oh," cried O'Hara, with a giggle at his own wit, "I make no statement that I cannot support by irresistible argument."

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

He had left his second pistol undisturbed in the holster. But, so saying, he presented the empty one in so pointed a manner that the Bishop started back, and Blue Devil, peering over O'Hara's shoulder, gave a nervous snort.

"Why," came the Bishop's voice from within the coach, "my friend, almost thou persuadest me! But I could, I fancy, better satisfy you of my conversion to your thesis, were you to lay aside for the moment that overpowering display of logic which tends to confuse the wits of the ordinary thinker, and to let us discuss the matter on even ground."

O'Hara laughed afresh. He appreciated the readiness with which Dr. Thurlow had kept up the jesting treatment of the situation; but at the same time was not without an airy contempt for his want of fight.

"Faith, and it's easy for a clergyman to have a character!" he thought, as he dropped the nose of his useless weapon from its guard over the coach window.

The Bishop's countenance appeared once more in the aperture. He raised in the left hand a large velvet purse which gave out a charming clink.

THE BLACK LACE MASK

"Remember, sir," he cried protestingly, "that this is robbing the widow and the orphan."

"Nay, I'm near an orphan myself," cried Lord Kilcrouney's heir cheerily.

"Approach, then," said the Bishop, in so silky a voice that O'Hara might well have paused before obeying. But the reckless Irishman rushed upon his fate with the blindness of those devoted to doom.

He never quite knew how it happened, and it was all over ere he had time to think. No sooner had he drawn within reach of the window than he found his wrist seized and turned in a grip so paralysing that the pistol fell from his fingers. A contest ensued, mighty enough to satisfy even his wild blood. The Bishop was in the coach, and if he had undeniable advantage in the first grip, O'Hara's legs were the stronger. But Blue Devil, whether disgusted at the state of affairs or seized with panic, turned the scale to his master's detriment.

His pulls upon the rein became so frenzied that, in a momentary relaxation of Dr. Thurlow's hold, Mr. O'Hara was thrown flat

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

on his back in the snow. Yet another second, and he found himself in the predicament of being nailed in that helpless posture with the Bishop's weighty knee upon his chest, and with the further persuasion of a cold rim of steel upon his forehead.

In the struggle the second carriage lamp had been extinguished. The murk of night was all around them. And poor Denis, hearing the clack of Blue Devil's rapidly retreating heels growing ever fainter in the distance, realised that he was indeed abandoned.

"Come down, William!" called the Bishop to his coachman. "Come down, and help me to secure the ruffian."

The Bishop had been very angry all the time, as Denis dreamily realised upon this sudden outburst, for it was as if pent-up thunder broke over his head.

"I'm afraid to leave the horses, my lord," came the quavering answer. "And, —"

"Poltroon!" rang his lordship's retort, with such fulminating heat that O'Hara trembled lest it should be communicated to the pistol at his temple.

Dr. Thurlow gave a snort like an angry

THE BLACK LACE MASK

bull, and once more devoted his attention to the capture of his thews and muscles.

"Up with you, Master Highwayman!" he ordered, relaxing the pressure of the well-proportioned episcopal knee as he spoke, but maintaining the unpleasant proximity of the pistol mouth, "and into the coach with you!"

Now, as O'Hara rose to his feet, stiff from his fall and the penetrating damp, he felt too firmly convinced of the Bishop's phenomenal muscularity to dream of attempting a fresh tussle with him. But Dr. Thurlow was a man of precaution. A new grip of iron fell upon the amateur highwayman's left elbow from behind ere he had quite recovered his balance, and the disconcerting barrel rim was thrust afresh against his ear in the dark with a crack that made his head ring.

"In default of the rope you deserve, sir," said the Bishop, "I must even continue to use the moral 'suasion.'" Upon this irony, O'Hara in a trice found himself inside the chaise, the door clapped to. "Drive on, William!"

And, as William, nothing loath this time, whipped up the mild horses, the Bishop's bulk was let down upon the cushions in front of his prisoner.

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

“I should like to see your face, friend; but, since you have disposed of both my lamps,” quoth he, “I must even wait till we reach Devizes.”

Mistress Kitty Bellairs had abandoned the elegant solitude of her parlour for the more cheerful bustling atmosphere of the inn hall. Ostensibly she was drawn thither by the sweet sounds of Miss Lawrence’s spinet in the “library” beyond the bar, but really she had tripped downstairs because, hearing beneath her windows the arrival of a solitary horseman, she had thought—hoped—it might be O’Hara.

Proportionate was her disappointment to recognise in the new guest the long teeth, the oblique glance and lanky figure of her pet aversion, Captain Spicer.

The gallant gentleman who, no doubt, thought the inn clear by this time of all the collateral actors in a certain unpleasant adventure, and had come back, it seemed, for the valise he had had, in his precipitation, to leave behind him, appeared no more rejoiced at this meeting with fair Bellairs than she herself. But, after an involuntary start of dismay, he controlled an impulse of re-

THE BLACK LACE MASK

treat with some presence of mind and advanced with smirk and flourish of hat, exclaiming in his ultra-fashionable accents:

"Is it possible! What uncammmon stroke of lack to find you still here, Madam! I had feared all the merry company had flawn. Our foolish young friend is quite recovered, I trust — from our little affair of honour."

Mistress Kitty had many grudges against Captain Spicer, but his culminating offence was in not being Mr. O'Hara to-night.

"I hardly think you would be allowed to go loose, sir," said she over her shoulder, "if Mr. Jernigan had *not* recovered."

From the discreet smile on Master Lawrence's countenance to the titter of the serving maid behind the bar and the suppressed guffaw of the ostler at the door, this remark of the lady was so much appreciated as to raise a yet greener tinge upon the Captain's already bilious countenance.

No favourite at "the Bear" was the military gentleman. He was hesitating between fear and malevolence; and Mistress Kitty, with a shrug, had turned upon her heel to seek retirement once more, when a very unwontedly medley of sounds directed everyone's attention to the street. The rumbling

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

of a coach, the clatter of horses' hoofs at a broken gallop, and loud shouts of "Murder!" "Thieves!" and "Fire!"

The Bishop's coachman had no sooner found himself within the safe circle of the town than his overcharged feelings escaped control. Dr. Thurlow's objurgations producing no result, that prelate, to his extreme annoyance, found himself the centre of a rapidly increasing crowd as the chaise drew up before the inn door. Therefore, to escape from the situation, he indomitably seized his highwayman once more by wrist and elbow and propelled him before him into the lobby of "the Bear" Inn.

This move was executed with such masterfulness and rapidity that the door had closed before the spectators realised how they had been defrauded — before O'Hara could collect sufficient energy of mind or body to offer resistance.

Kitty's velvet eyes grew ever wider and rounder as they gazed upon the scene. But when they fell upon the lace-masked figure in its sinister yellow coat, mud-plastered, a sudden gleam of terror awoke in their pansy depths. It was fortunate, perhaps, that it should be considered almost an indecency

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

for a lady of quality to appear before the world unrouged, otherwise her pretty cheeks might have challenged attention.

The Bishop removed one mighty hand from his prisoner's collar and was about to tear away the black face-cover, when O'Hara turned his head and whispered in the episcopal ear:

"For God's sake, as you're a Christian, as you're a gentleman, as you're a man, my lord, do not let the lady see my face."

The Bishop checked his movement, and looked from the speaker to Mistress Bellairs. Kitty's eye was still fixed upon the masked countenance in intense endeavour to penetrate the disguise. Of course, it was the most absurd thing in the world. Other people had red hair, and there was nothing to prevent a highwayman having long taper hands, which would show white through their grime if he were fair of skin!

Into the Bishop's hesitation O'Hara whispered again:

"Sure, it was an empty pistol I held at your lordship's head!"

Then a smile distended Doctor Thurlow's well-chiselled lips.

"Upon that score we are quits, friend,"

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

he whispered back, "for it was this same empty argument you found so convincing yourself."

Then, as the rigid stillness that came over the highwayman's figure betrayed how the shot told, the captor went on, still in his prisoner's ear : " It strikes me you are green at your trade, sir ; why, the barrel was still smoking when you held it in at the window ! "

O'Hara remained speechless, and the Bishop, now in high good humour with himself, drew the weapon from the deep pocket of his coat, and flung it on the bar.

" Yes, Master Lawrence," cried he in a loud voice, " my coach has been stopped, as you see. But, as you see also, the setter of the snare has fallen into his own trap. Nay, I have not yet had time to ascertain the identity of the ruffian. But that ceremony we will postpone till a fitter moment. Ladies," said the Bishop, with a small smile, " must be spared uncomely sights. Keep an eye to the gentleman, you two men. Ah ! Mistress Bellairs, I believe." He advanced with a very fine grace.

" Dr. Thurlow," said the lady faintly, then rallied, fluttered her plumes and smiled.

THE BLACK LACE MASK

O'Hara, drawing a deep breath of relief, realised that he had become the centre of an awe-struck circle. Little as he now cared in his despair who recognised him, so long as Kitty did not, he was far from surmising that there was not one of the inn household that had not already fathomed his secret.

A general, silent consternation had fallen upon the gathered establishment. Boots had recognised his legs, Master Lawrence his pistol. The chambermaid was acquainted with the yellow lining of a coat she had herself mended, and, where it was flung open at the neck, she could actually mark the empty space once adorned by that pair of silver buttons which (with a smiling word of greater value) he had presented to her for her pains. Lydia, hanging over the banisters, had unerringly discerned the pattern of a mysteriously lost piece of her mistress's black Spanish lace. The very ostlers could have sworn to the clean cut of his knees. All knew, but none spoke. During his ten days' stay he had somehow, in various ways, found a soft corner in everybody's heart; there was a general breath of relief as the Bishop granted reprieve. With a curious unanimity of silence they would

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

have scorned to betray him even to each other.

"I can scarcely credit it," cried Mistress Bellairs with a nervous laugh, "that your lordship should actually have been stopped on the road like the common laity."

"The gentleman yonder," answered Dr. Thurlow, with a noticeable emphasis on the noun, "endeavoured to persuade me that he had as good a right to my purse as I myself; but I fancy"—and the Bishop lightly ran either hand over a muscular arm—"that I had somewhat the better of the argument all round."

"Oh, we are aware, my lord," retorted Kitty, with her prettiest smile, "that it does not do for a man to pit himself against you, either morally or physically."

Again the Bishop smiled. Facts were indubitable, and he certainly had an unwonted record for a divine.

"I vow," proceeded the lady coquettishly, "'t is most prodigious strange that I should be loitering in the public hall thus! But, indeed, 't is your lordship must bear the blame—I have not the heart of a mouse myself, but I never could resist a tale of valour."

THE BLACK LACE MASK

She clasped her hands and cast upon him a glance of velvet softness from between half-closed lids. Her cheeks were burning with a lovelier scarlet than hare's-foot had ever spread. His lordship (not an unsusceptible man) was distinctly stimulated.

She saw the impression produced — Incomparable Bellairs! — and hastened to follow up the advantage. It was so imperative to draw the Bishop away, if anything was to be done for that ruffian of a highwayman, whose hair shone red through his damp powder, whose hands were long and white like a gentleman's.

"My supper is about to be served. As I imagine you have not yet ordered yours, may I not have the honour of your lordship's company?"

"Dear madam," responded the Bishop, with elegant readiness, "but the time to see to my prisoner ——" With what unction did the worthy divine roll the words upon his tongue.

"Fie!" she interrupted, "do you put the highwayman before the lady?"

"Nay, madam, but duty before pleasure!"

"Nevertheless," answered Kitty pat, "the creature can't spoil by keeping, and my partridges will."

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

The Bishop laughed gently. A little plump roast partridge in company with a little plump lady of virtue, wit and quality — agreeable perspective!

“Why, then ——” said he.

“Your lordship’s prisoner,” here intervened the landlord, “will be as safe in my loft as in the jug itself, and he can be charged in the morning.”

“I shall hold you warranty, Mr. Lawrence,” said the prelate with warning sternness.

Master Lawrence rubbed his hands with a superior smile.

“Wife!” called he into the bar, “conduct his lordship to his apartment.”

The Bishop moved majestically away in the wake of his buxom hostess. But yet Kitty lingered.

Captain Spicer, a forgotten personality in the chimney corner, itching for the revelation of that identity which even he suspected, could now no longer put off the moment of gratified malice. He tiptoed his way round towards the motionless figure, and, suddenly pushing in between the guard of ostlers, extended his bony hand towards a hanging tag of the veiling lace.

Mistress Bellairs, eyes and thoughts still

THE BLACK LACE MASK

fixed upon the torturing enigma, caught her breath with what was almost a little cry. She saw the concealing folds jerked upwards for a second, had a vision, swift as lightning, of O'Hara's pale face, and in that instant their glances met. The next the mask was pulled down again into its place; and, swift as thunder-clap follows flash, retribution descended upon the spy. Before he had had time to utter a word, Captain Spicer, struck full upon his grinning jaw, fell like a stone at O'Hara's feet.

Dr. Thurlow, who had paused on the first landing to glance over the banisters, smiled to himself, then shrugged his shoulders in scorn.

"'T is the fate of peeping Toms," quoth he.

Leaving the damaged gentleman to be carried away between two vastly unsympathetic post-boys, Master Lawrence plucked the prisoner by the sleeve. And as O'Hara suffered himself to be led away, in miserable submission, to an improvised lock-up, he heard Kitty cry in a tone of shrill mirth:

"Don't neglect my supper, landlord," and the sound fell on his heart like a blow.

Master Lawrence went up the creaking stairs beside the still masked figure without

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

uttering a single word. But he walked heavily and shook his head from time to time as he thought to himself: "My mind misgave me when he refused the stirrup-cup!"

Despite her anxiety for the condition of the partridges, it was after all Mistress Kitty who kept the Bishop waiting. She was closeted with Miss Lydia in such earnest conclave that Mistress Lawrence herself was at last fain to summon her forth. But, when the little lady emerged, it was with such sparkling eyes and happy rose-red cheeks that Dr. Thurlow forgot on the spot his rising sense of injury.

Mr. O'Hara had laid aside his mask at last; he sat on the edge of the pallet-bed — which the post-boys never found too hard for sound sleep — and reviewed the situation with the calmness of despair. Of the royal supper which Master Lawrence had sent up to him, he had scarcely tasted anything but that bottle from his favourite bin. The very delicacy with which his tastes had been studied, reminded him unpleasantly of the condemned man's statutory meal before execution.

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

The deference with which even the extempore guard treated him seemed to savour of the last pity. Death and he had hobbled too often for him to mind much the thought of the bony comrade's final embrace. But now that he had brought the fate upon himself, the thought of that dismal dance on air, of the chain gibbet at the cross-roads, no longer seemed to him to be in the light of a fitting revenge on the woman who had slighted him, or of a gallant defiance to an unappreciative world.

"Well, God help me!" said poor Denis. "It's not that life would be so sweet — and a man can always make a fight for it, and get shot on the quiet. But I'll not bring trouble on these good creatures here. I'll wait till they turn the magistrate's dogs on me."

A solitary tallow-candle threw more shadow than light in the long bare attic.

Ostler Joe, who had been deputed to watch the captive, had tried to raise his spirits by varied accounts of all the gentlemen of the road he had personally known, by highly sympathetic details concerning their last moments, but had at last given up the task; and, after philosophically dis-

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

posing himself of O'Hara's disdained repast, he was snoring the snores of the just upon a sack of straw under the dormer.

It must have been close upon midnight when there came a sound which, although it had in it something of a patter, something of a scratching, something also of a scurry, was yet quite distinct from the rain, the rats, and the mice. It was accompanied by the creaking of boards and approached steadily to halt at close proximity. Then it was resumed with fresh scratching and a sharp scrunch; an unnoticed door at the end of the loft was slowly opened before O'Hara's astonished gaze and a beckoning hand was passed through the aperture. He rubbed his eyes. No, he was not dreaming. (The snores of the ostler now became quite appalling in amplitude.) O'Hara rose and advanced. His heavy boots and tired feet made a terrible noise — but, heavens, how that ostler slept! With that beckoning hand before him, which became ever whiter and smaller as he approached it, O'Hara pressed on the length of the garret. When he reached the door the hand laid hold of him suddenly with a nipping grasp, and he was drawn outside in the twinkling of an eye.

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

Then, to his intense, if unreasoning, disappointment, Mr. O'Hara recognised, by the light of a lantern placed on the floor at her feet, the sharp features of Miss Lydia. But the next instant his mercurial spirits leaped from frosty depths to summer heights. What! His little Kitty did care after all whether he walked or hung! Then was life a precious and delightful thing again — a thing to be fought for.

Miss Lydia was nothing if not prompt; she left him little time for reflection. Whipping up her light, she nipped him once more shrewishly by the wrist and hurried him along passages and down stairs at a rate that made his brain spin. They reached at length a dull basement room, which, by the faint lantern-shine, from its arrays of brushes, pots, and travel-stained footgear, he identified as "boots'" own dominions. Lydia set her light on the table with a bang.

"Off with your coat, sir," she ordered.

"Why, me darling?"

"There is no time for conversation, sir; you've managed your affairs too clever for that. Off with that coat! It's not the first time I've had the dressing of you. And it's another sort of dressing I'd give you if I had

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

my way!" She had the coat in her hands by this time, and was rolling it up with a vindictive energy that gave point to her words. "Now I'll trouble you for your boots, Mr. O'Hara."

"My boots!"

"Your boots. And quick about them!"

She waited acidly. Then, tucking the coat under one arm, seized the desired objects in both hands and staggered with them towards the door. There, to O'Hara's intense mystification, her burden was received by some unseen third party.

There followed a rapid interchange of whispers, a suppressed guffaw, and Miss Lydia, banging the door, reappeared into the room. Mystification was replaced by stupefaction in O'Hara's mind, as he now beheld in her hands, not the yellow-lined garment of his infamy, but a handsome, sober *roquelaure* which had been packed away in the box left under Mr. Lawrence's charge when he had started on his ill-fated expedition.

"You'll find, I fancy, a pair of boots of your own in that row," said the damsel briefly, "and you'd look less of a zany if you'd put them on instead of standing there in your stocking feet."

❖ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❖

And, as nevertheless he still stood and stared, she herself (dropping apostrophes, sharp as hail, upon fools who could not help themselves and idiots who deserved to be left to their fates) ran to the indicated spot, picked out a pair of ancient top-boots (once, indeed, Mr. O'Hara's) and flung them towards him. In a minute more her will was accomplished. And there was something so restoring to his confidence and self-esteem, in standing again in the garb of a respected individual, that Denis gave a subdued whoop, made a pirouette, and caught Lydia by the waist.

The next instant a resounding slap descended upon his cheek. The situation was delightfully familiar. It really seemed as if the miserable Denis, sitting in the garret and looking forward to the gallows, must have been the mere creation of a nightmare. But Miss Lydia's irate cry promptly dispelled the pleasing fancy.

"I'll have you know, sir, I keep my lips for honest men! And if it were n't for my mistress ——"

Up went the barometer once more. If it were not for her mistress!

He would have been off into a dream.

❧ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❧

There is a stage of lover's love that seems to be all dreamland. But Lydia was a young person calculated to keep a man's wits awake. She could pinch and she could shake as shrewdly as a north-east wind.

"Now mark you, sir," cried she, "there's rope still a'dangling over your head. And if you don't want to dance on nothing, come next assizes, you'll be pleased to pay attention to what I'm saying."

"Sure, I'm listening with all my ears and eyes, darling!"

"Your horse has come back, sir. Some beasts has a deal more sense than men. Now when a horse comes back to stable alone it's like enough his rider's thrown. And unless the rider's broke his skull (which is too good for some people which is born for other ends), if that rider isn't the greatest gaby between this and Land's End, it's like he'll follow his horse's example and walk back to the nearest shelter."

Here she took him by the elbow and conducting him to a flight of steps at the further end of the room informed him that they led down into the cellar, where he would find a door giving upon a back street.

"And, if then," added she, "you can't find

THE BLACK LACE MASK

help for yourself, you'll be past anybody else's."

He could hardly keep himself from dancing, whistling, whooping in his ever increasing exhilaration. To be free, to have a fresh adventure, delicious in audacity and humour, before him; to be risking his life still, and to know that Kitty cared. Could even an Irishman invent a better turn of fate?

He snatched a kiss, and, as Lydia whisked away, she dropped him a last superfluous piece of advice, which showed that, after all, even she was rescuing the good-for-nought *con amore*:

"If you could find a good deep puddle, I should advise you to fall down in it, Mr. O'Hara."

"Scald me," cried the ostler, with intense astonishment on his grinning face. "'T is never you, sir! Master Lawrence, Master — House ——" raising a mighty bellow, then turning again to O'Hara — "Blue Devil's come home, sir. We was afraid some accident . . .!"

The house door was flung wide open, and out popped Master Lawrence's good grey head.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

"'Tis Mr. O'Hara," bellowed the ostler, in desperate excitement.

Mr. O'Hara was seized and dragged into the hall by both hands. Before he had time even to begin to narrate the carefully prepared account of his mishap in the dark he was borne down by Master Lawrence's effusive flood of greeting.

"Forgive me, sir, that I should so presume, but I cannot refrain from shaking you by the hand! We have been in a prodigious state of anxiety about you, sir. Wife—" in stentorian shouts—"wife, here is Mr. O'Hara! safe and sound. The women, sir, have been crying their eyes out. When Blue Devil came home riderless, says Mistress Lawrence: 'He's dead, he's gone! I always said,' says she, 'he's too good to live!' We dared not tell the lady," said the excellent man, sinking his voice and still pumping O'Hara's hand up and down. "All day long she kept asking if Mr. O'Hara's not back yet. And Mistress Lawrence says: 'Let her have the partridges first.' Ah, here comes Mistress Lawrence herself—Wife," cried the landlord boisterously, "Mr. O'Hara's been telling me all about it. He was thrown in Coombe Common. That horse of Lord

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

Mandeville's, *as* Mr. O'Hara says, was ever a tricky beast. And that there bit of road by Coombe Hollow, wife, is a nasty one, *as* Mr. O'Hara truly says. He's had a fall on his back, *as* you see, Mistress Lawrence. But there, *as* he says, all's well that ends well!"

"Dear, dear," said Mistress Lawrence, laughing and crying together. "This has been a night of adventure!"

"Aye, aye," cried the landlord with a fixed eye and a very loud laugh. "His lordship the Bishop (whom you know we expected, sir), he was stopped, sir, on the road, actually stopped! But, aha! we've got the ruffian upstairs safe enough!"

"Aha-ha!" echoed Mr. O'Hara with a similarly fixed eye.

"Is that Mr. O'Hara?" cried a shrill pipe, upon the stair. And Miss Lydia, all lace apron and silk flounces, rushed into the hall. "Do not tell me," she cried, "it is Mr. O'Hara! Oh! is he hurt? Has he broken his head or his leg? Oh! what I have gone through this night, seeing him in my mind, lying in his gore, while my poor, unconscious mistress ate partridge with the Bishop!"

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

The three turned in speechless admiration to gaze upon the Abigail, who, clasping her hands, let off a half dozen hysterical small shrieks, which formed the culminating point of her own satisfaction. Then she protested, in pathetic accents, that she could not delay an instant before imparting to her mistress the exciting news of the night's anxiety and its happy end; and was up the stairs again in a twinkling.

Seldom had that gifted damsel had opportunities that afforded her finer scope. Enjoying herself to the ends of her finger tips, she staggered into the parlour, where Mistress Bellairs and her distinguished guest had arrived at the agreeable stage of post-prandial sympathy, when chairs are drawn a little closer to each other, the last glass of wine is sipped, a nut nibbled to the accompaniment of mutually appreciated wit and unctuous little laughs. Both looked up with amazement upon Lydia's tempestuous entrance. At least Kitty's large and lovely gaze expressed as intense a surprise as the Bishop's full and haughty eye.

"Oh!" cried the handmaid, advancing with a series of jerks and still pressing that region of her trim bodice which she believed

THE BLACK LACE MASK

to be the residence of her virginal heart, "O ma'am! can I speak at last, and is the anguish of this night of terror over? Mr. O'Hara's not dead, ma'am——"

"What is this?" cried Kitty, rising straight up from her chair, both her little hands in the air—"what does she say? Mr. O'Hara dead?"

"Heavens," cried Lydia, "my mistress is swooning!" and made a dash in time to catch the fair form in her arms. Kitty turned her head so that her face was hidden upon her woman's neck and became alarmingly rigid all over.

Really, in these days of rouge it was very difficult for a lady of quality to manage her little affairs of the affections with verisimilitude.

"La, your lordship, 't is the only man my poor mistress has ever cared for!" exclaimed Miss Lydia. "What a zany am I to have gone and frightened her!"

The Bishop had risen to his feet upon a first impulse of anxious concern. But here he suddenly sat down again and remarked drily:

"But if the gentleman is not hurt——"

"Now," cried Lydia, "and I never thought

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

of that! Will your lordship support my lady—for an instant. And I will fetch Mr. O'Hara."

No gentleman, be he forty times a bishop, could refuse the tender task. Before he had even time to consider, Dr. Thurlow found the lovely burden in his embrace.

Kitty's rigidity relaxed. She sighed faintly and opened her long lashes, very close to his face. What a round frail thing it was! What a wisp of fragrant lace and soft silken stuff, and withal what a delicate solidity!

"Oh, dear!" said Kitty. "Did they say Mr. O'Hara was dead?" Her lips trembled, and tears, genuine tears, welled up to those fabulous lashes.

Dr. Thurlow deposited her in a chair, a little hastily in spite of his gentleness; great steps were approaching with headlong rapidity in the passage without.

He had just time to say with distinct emphasis: "Mr. O'Hara is perfectly safe, my dear madam," when the latter gentleman burst into the room. Kitty sprang to her feet and flew like a bird into his arms. If her vivacity was somewhat singular in one just out of a swoon, it was in-

THE BLACK LACE MASK

stinct, at all events, with much sincerity of emotion.

Dr. Thurlow contemplated the pair a minute or two with no unbenevolent eye; then he cleared his throat, and Denis and his Kitty, falling apart, turned flushed and anxious faces upon him.

"Madam," said the divine, "I rejoice that your anxiety should have so favourable a termination — Mr. O'Hara, we have met before." He paused a second; and, as the usually glib Irishman seemed unready with a response, the prelate proceeded with a twinkle in his eye.

"I will not tax your memory at this auspicious moment. If I remember right, it was . . . in Bath."

He paused again to bend over Kitty's hand. "I thank you, dear Mistress Bellairs, for a most entertaining evening. And pleasure having superseded business, the sterner call now awaits me. I have yet to examine my prisoner."

If Lydia ever deserved well of her employer, it was at this crucial moment.

"I fear your lordship will get little out of him," she intervened pertly. "They tell me downstairs that the wretch's jaw must be

❖ INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS ❖

either dislocated or broken, for he cannot articulate a single word."

"Indeed," said his lordship. And his red eyebrows travelled a perceptible inch higher.

"O Bishop, Bishop," cried Kitty in a high, excited voice, menacing him with her finger, "your hand is more mighty even than you wot of!"

The Bishop's glance rested upon her once again with singular expression. Then, with his hand on the door-handle, he turned once more to the Irishman.

"Mr. O'Hara must really be quite puzzled," quoth he, urbanely.

"Oh," cried the latter, with a return of his old audacious spirit, "they were telling me something about it in the hall. I hope your lordship will not be hard on the poor devil!"

"I trust that I shall never be hard on anybody," said the divine enigmatically. And then he added with a note of quizzical meaning:

"You must have had a very bad fall, Mr. O'Hara, to put you into that condition ——"

And as O'Hara, in fresh perturbation, glanced down at his mud-plastered gar-

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

ments, the Bishop made his *congé* and was gone.

.

The post-boy was still aggressively snoring when Master Lawrence conducted his episcopal guest into the attic chamber. And there, indeed, lay the prisoner, with the identical lace mask gracefully disposed across his bandaged countenance, wrapped in the identical turned coat. True, the figure within the yellow folds seemed to have shrunk most remarkably since supper-time, and the highwayman was now groaning in a manner very unlike the stoic calm with which he had previously submitted to the inevitable. Nay, it would even seem as if, at sight of the Bishop, the wretched creature had something of importance to communicate, for he made efforts to rise upon the pallet, gesticulating and producing strenuous but incoherent sounds.

The Bishop remained regarding him in silence for so lengthy a period that Master Lawrence might have been observed to change colour more than once, while he stammered something incoherent about obtaining a warrant the first thing in the morning.

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS

But, Dr. Thurlow turning his full eye upon him, the words instantly died upon the landlord's lips, and the Bishop smiled in a most disconcerting manner.

"Nay," said his lordship then, "send rather for the surgeon. The misguided creature is punished enough and I trust it will be a lesson to him. — Let it be a lesson to you, young man," said he sternly.

The ungrateful highwayman howled more dismally than ever as the magnanimous words fell upon his ears.

"The darling Bishop!" cried Kitty when Miss Lydia rushed in with the last astounding news. "I vow and declare that I would marry him to-morrow without the least hesitation if ——"

"If what, my jewel?" said O'Hara. He was holding her very comfortably by the waist. And only a second before, with a countenance of seraphic bliss, amounting almost to imbecility, he had volunteered the statement that he'd not complain if they did hang him "after that." "If what, pulse of my soul?"

"If I did not feel it my duty to sacrifice my life and look after a perfect gaby who is

❧ THE BLACK LACE MASK ❧

incapable of taking care of himself," cried the future Lady Kilcronev sharply; and rapped him over the knuckles with her fan.

But she dimpled adorably as she spoke —
Incomparable Bellairs!



INCOMPARABLE
BELLAIRS. *By* AGNES &
EGERTON CASTLE. *Arranged*
and printed for FREDERICK
A. STOKES COMPANY
at The University Press,
Cambridge, U. S. A., in
November, MDCCCIII

Comments on "The Star Dreamer"

"The Star Dreamer" holds us in a tension and leaves us enthralled. — *Philadelphia Book News*.

"The Star Dreamer" is a delightful example of the sunny and winsome books, full of the joy of living, like its authors' "Young April." It has the indescribable buoyancy of youth in it. — *Chicago Record-Herald*.

Here is a novel that cannot be too heartily recommended. It stands alone, in an atmosphere of its own, in a garden where flower romance and poetry and the old tale of human love, in a light that is mellow and golden. — *New York Mail and Express*.

"The Star Dreamer" is a model of what a romance should be. Undoubtedly the best book yet written by these authors. — *The Athenæum* (London).

To those who love a romantic story, who delight to lose themselves for the moment in the magic of such a dream world as that of "Young April," this new novel, "The Star Dreamer," will afford unalloyed pleasure. — *Milwaukee Free-Press*.

THE STAR DREAMER



BY
AGNES & EGERTON CASTLE

Frederick A. Stokes Company, Publishers

Comments on "The Bath Comedy"

It is as blithe as a May day when the heart is young. . . . — *Philadelphia Telegraph*.

The Bath Comedy



by
Agnes & Egerton Castle

The fantasy is of the daintiest, the humor is of the sunniest. . . . A beautiful book, beautifully written. — *New York Tribune*.

A right merry tale. . . . The narrative is breathless in its interest, and yet so witty and polished that perusal becomes a double pleasure. — *Detroit Free-Press*.

As incident follows upon incident, each touched with the very spirit of comedy, the delight of the reader grows apace, and he feels that he would gladly remain in such company for an indefinite period. — *Chicago Dial*.

A sparkling, dancing story . . . like one of Watteau's pictures — gay, artificial, yet delightful. — *Buffalo Express*.

The author of "The School for Scandal" might have written it and his reputation not have suffered seriously thereby. — *Chicago Times-Herald*.

Frederick A. Stokes Company, Publishers

